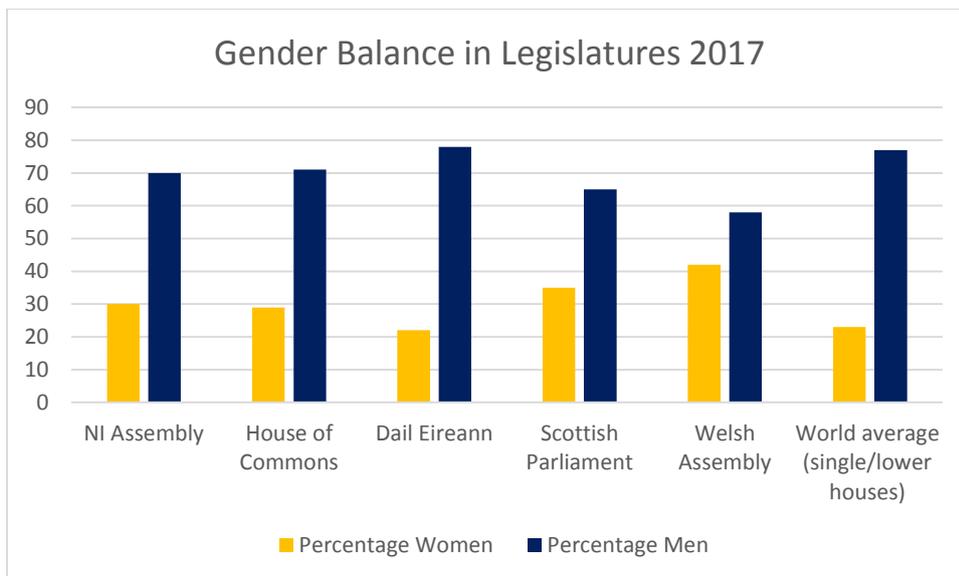


Women and the 2017 Assembly Election in Northern Ireland

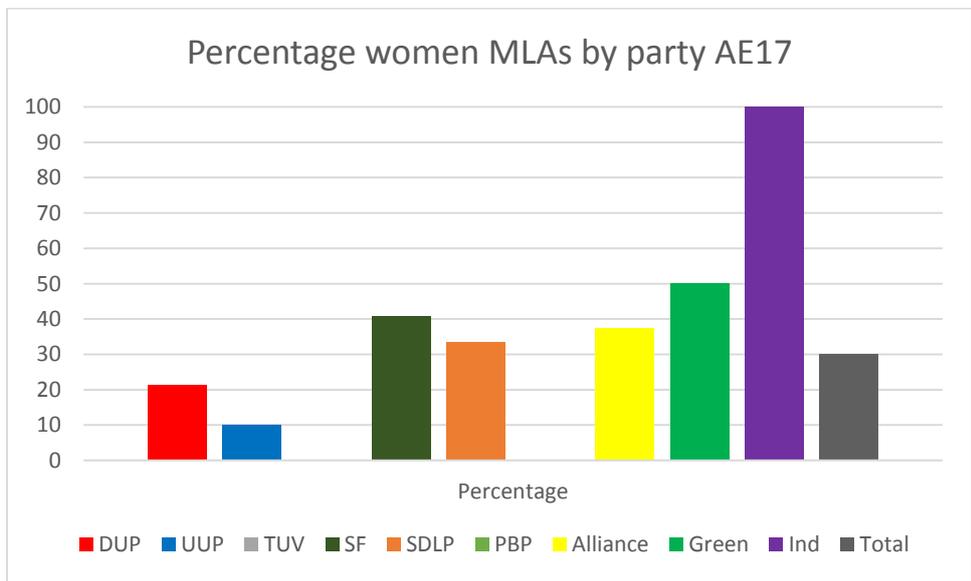
Danielle Roberts, PhD Candidate, Ulster University

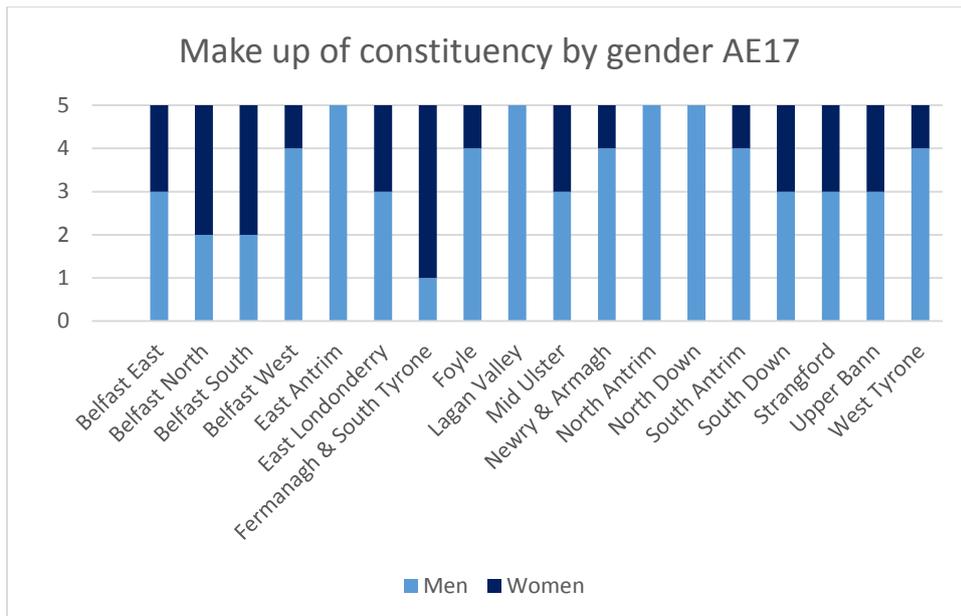
The Assembly election in 2017 has continued the upward trend in the increase of women MLAs. Women now make up 30% of the Assembly, an increase from 28% at the last election just 10 months ago. The 2016 election result saw the number of women increase by half from 19% in 2011. Things have vastly improved from just [13% women](#) in the first Assembly in 1998 (Ark 2002). While 30% verges on critical mass, typically when a third of an institution is made up of women we can expect to see some change in its operation, it still is not enough for Stormont to be considered gender balanced. Women's representation as elected representatives is also low at other levels in Northern Ireland, only 11% of MPs elected in 2015 are women and 25% of councillors. The Northern Ireland Assembly now has a greater proportion of women than the House of Commons (29%) and Dáil Éireann (22%).



What is particularly notable about the performance of women in this election is that the percentage of women went up, while seats went down. The Assembly has reduced from 108 seats to 90, losing a seat in every constituency. It has been observed that women typically perform better in multi seat constituencies, both in terms of being elected, and in terms of being selected to stand in the first place. The percentage of women candidates increased at this election to 31% from 27% in 2016. The Green Party fielded 50% women and 50% men for the second time. Sinn Féin, Alliance and the SDLP were not far behind, all at around 40%. The two biggest unionist parties lagged behind with the UUP at 25% and the DUP at 21%. In the first Assembly election in 1998, only 17% of candidates were women (ARK 2002).

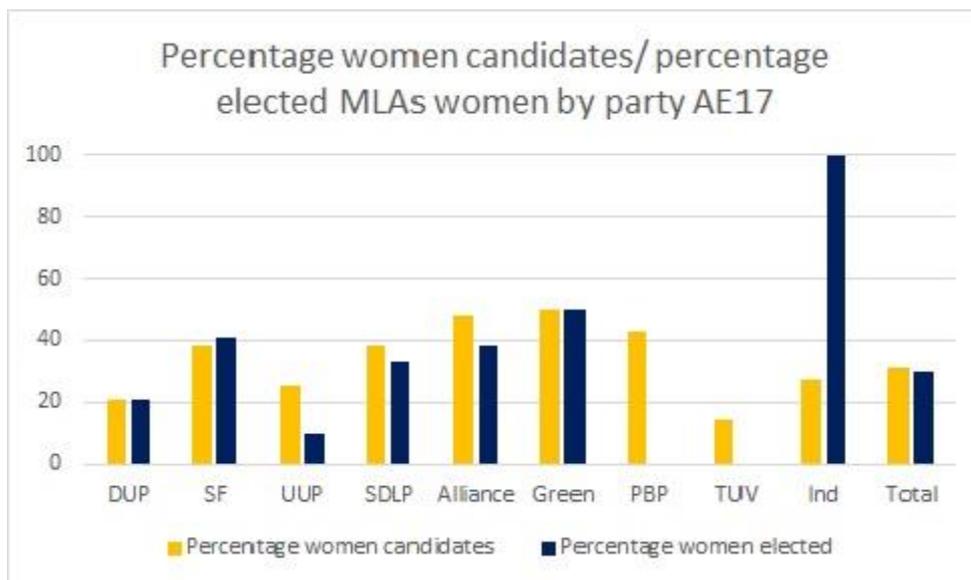
There is still a disparity across the ethno-national divide in terms of women’s representation. Even though 3 outgoing DUP MLAs, as well as Johnathan Bell who had resigned from the party, did not stand for re-election not one of them was replaced by a woman candidate. Despite this the percentage of DUP women MLAs elected stood firm at 21%, even with the losses suffered by the party. It was a good election for women in Sinn Féin, with 5 of them topping the polls in first preference votes including leader Michelle O’Neill, as well as a number of first time MLA candidates. All 4 first time elected woman MLAs in 2017 are from Sinn Féin. Dolores Kelly from the SDLP won back her seat after losing it in the 2016 Assembly election. Not every woman candidate had a success story, with several high profile women like Jo Ann Dobson, and former Junior Minister Emma Little-Pengelly not being returned. There are 4 constituencies which elected all men. Two of them, North Antrim and East Antrim, have never had a woman MLA since the Assembly’s inception in 1998.





There are barriers to participation experienced by women generally known as the 5Cs; cash, confidence, candidate selection, culture, and caring responsibilities (Galligan 2014). These apply to women across the board on the basis of their gender. Research carried out by the [Assembly](#) published in 2015 highlighted these issues as well as logistical barriers such as the tradition of long hours, the impact of portrayals of women elected representative in the media, and issues at a party level including candidate selection. There are also barriers particular to the NI context - fear, apathy and the adversarial nature of NI politics were highlighted in the assembly research (Northern Ireland Assembly 2015). Galligan (2014) notes that the NI conflict has been shown to have “[a dampening effect on women’s political ambition](#)”.

There are indications of particular issues for protestant, unionist, and/or loyalist women at a number of levels. Unionist parties tend to advocate for women’s representation less than Nationalist, or non-determining parties. While improvement has been made in recent elections, this disparity is still evident in their candidate selection. In the Westminster 2015 election, only 3 of the 31 (around 10%) candidates from the main Unionist parties were women; whereas a quarter of all candidates standing for the Westminster election overall were women. Both constituencies mentioned above which have never had a woman MLA are predominantly unionist. There are also studies demonstrating that protestant women’s support for devolution is low, and protestant women are largely disengaged when it comes to elections. Whether this has changed in the 2017 election will be interesting to find out.



It must also be considered that particular groups of women face additional barriers due to characteristics such as sexuality and class. We must be careful not to homogenise women and avoid a one size fits all 'remedy' to low levels of political participation. There were several openly LGBT candidates – yes all letters were covered with Ellen Murray, who was NI's first transgender candidate in 2016, standing again in West Belfast. There were also a number of candidates from ethnic minorities. None of them were elected.

Coming out of this election, we may see the both First and Deputy First Minister positions being held by women, although that is in no way certain at this moment in time! Women candidates received 32% of first preference votes, this is in line with the number of women candidates and suggests that the electorate as a whole is 'gender blind' when it comes to choosing who to vote for. There were also two pregnant women elected, perhaps reinforcing changes in attitudes as to where exactly women 'belong'. There are still no openly LGBTQ MLAs, and no BAME candidates were elected in either 2016 or 2017.

It remains to be seen whether the increase in women MLAs will result in movement on issues of particular interest to women such as the demands of [Reclaim the Agenda](#) including affordable childcare and reproductive healthcare, both issues which the Assembly has not adequately addressed to date. On International Women's Day 2016 a cross party Women's Caucus was launched at Stormont. On International Women's Day 2017 talks were underway to form a new government. With the political upheaval and scandals the women's caucus didn't get a chance to really get going. Hopefully with buoyed numbers they can make some progress on the issues raised with all political

parties before the election in the [#time2commit](#) campaign.

The 2016 Assembly election was a shake up for the assembly, with the percentage of women increasing by 50%. The 2017 election was also a shake up, with the reduction of seats from 108 seats to 90 mostly being felt by unionist parties. In the context of the removal of one seat per constituency even the small 2% increase in the number of women is a bigger achievement than it may appear by simply looking at raw numbers. As well as an increase in women MLAs, there is also a slight majority of MLAs who support equal marriage and at least limited reform of the abortion law. If the ongoing talks are successful and the Assembly returns, we may see a few more political shake ups over the course of this term.

Women elected to the Assembly, 2017

Name	Party	Constituency	Elected/Re-elected
Joanne Bunting	DUP	Belfast East	Re-elected
Naomi Long	Alliance	Belfast East	Re-elected
Paula Bradley	DUP	Belfast North	Re-elected
Carál Ní Chuilín	SF	Belfast North	Re-elected
Nichola Mallon	SDLP	Belfast North	Re-elected
Órlaithí Flynn	SF	Belfast West	Elected
Clare Bailey	Green	Belfast South	Re-elected
Paula Bradshaw	Alliance	Belfast South	Re-elected
Claire Hanna	SDLP	Belfast South	Re-elected
Caoimhe Archibald	SF	East Londonderry	Re-elected
Claire Sugden	Independent	East Londonderry	Re-elected
Rosemary Barton	UUP	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Re-elected
Jemma Dolan	SF	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Elected
Arlene Foster	DUP	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Re-elected
Michelle Gildernew	SF	Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Re-elected
Elisha McCallion	SF	Foyle	Elected
Linda Dillon	SF	Mid Ulster	Re-elected
Michelle O'Neill	SF	Mid Ulster	Re-elected
Megan Fearon	SF	Newry and Armagh	Re-elected

Pam Cameron	DUP	South Antrim	Re-elected
Sinead Bradley	SDLP	South Down	Re-elected
Sinéad Ennis	SF	South Down	Elected
Kellie Armstrong	Alliance	Strangford	Re-elected
Michelle McIlveen	DUP	Strangford	Re-elected
Dolores Kelly	SDLP	Upper Bann	Re-elected (Previously held seat as MLA 2003-2016)
Carla Lockhart	DUP	Upper Bann	Re-elected
Michaela Boyle	SF	West Tyrone	Re-elected

Danielle Roberts (@DaniRNI) is a third year PhD candidate at Ulster University. Her work focuses on the barriers to political participation particularly experienced by women from the protestant, unionist, and/or loyalist communities.

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