Why are there so few women in Irish politics, north and south?:
The views of young people.

By Bronagh Rice

Introduction

Women have been consistently under-represented in Irish politics for decades, which poses problems for democracy and legitimacy within Irish politics. As such, this research aims to examine the reasons for this under-representation. Emphasising the views of young people is of great importance if we consider the influence they will have on the demographic of legislatures in the future. A series of interviews were conducted with 10 young people from across Ireland, using a range of questions to gain a general insight into their level of awareness of the situation, and to provide a more in-depth insight into what they considered the reasons for such under-representation of women.

Results of the Research

In relation to female MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly, 90% of respondents overestimated the percentage of women who had been elected to the Assembly in the 2011 election. Women currently comprise 19% of all MLAs, making the 10-20% range the accurate answer illustrated by the shaded blue column in Figure 1. The responses are illustrated in blue in Figure 1 and further analysis shows that 50% of respondents believed that there were at least twice as many women in the assembly than is the case. The results show a considerable overestimation by young people as to the percentage of women’s political representation in Northern Ireland. From the data collected it is evident that the case is the same for the south of the island. 90% of respondents also believed that there were more women present in the Dáil than in reality, illustrated by the red columns in Figure 1. After the 2011 election in the Republic, only 15% of TDs elected were women. However not only did the young people, from both the north and south of Ireland, overestimate the level in the south but a substantial 20% believed there was over three times as many women present in the Dáil, the correct level being illustrated by the shaded red column in Figure 1. The data showed that there was no evident difference between the accuracy of answers given by young people from the north or the south. Young people from the north of the island were just as likely to overestimate the percentage of women in the assembly as they were to overestimate the level in the Dáil. The case was the same for young people from the south. The results show a clear lack of awareness and knowledge among young people regarding the situation of women in politics in Ireland. This overestimation highlights a serious problem as these young people are the future generation of voters and the level of women's political representation is unlikely to improve in years to come if the young generation are not aware of the problem.
The situation becomes even worse when examining the responses to the perceived number of female ministers in the north and south. Young people once again substantially overestimated the number of women who held ministerial positions. Figure 2 below illustrates the responses. The current number of female ministers in the north is three, which 10% of participants correctly responded and which is represented by the blue shaded column in Figure 2. The solid blue columns represent the remaining answers provided and, although 10% of respondents actually underestimated the number of female ministers, 80% of young people believed there were greater numbers of female ministers, with 10% of respondents believing there were twice as many. In relation to ministerial positions held by women in the south, all those interviewed overestimated the number, with 40% believing there were almost three times more women ministers than the two that are present.

It was a similar case when it came to female party leaders in Irish politics, as illustrated by Figure 3. All respondents believed that there was at least one party in the Republic of Ireland led by a woman, with 90% believing the same about the situation in the north. However, in reality, no women hold the position of party leader in any party north or south of the border.
The results of these questions reinforce the impression suggested by the initial question, namely that there is a severe overestimation on the part of young people in Ireland as to the level of women's representation in Irish politics and this poses serious problems for aspiring women politicians.

Young People’s Explanations for Women’s Under-Representation

The initial questions of the interview provided a general insight into the degree of awareness among young people and the remaining questions in the interview provided a deeper insight into the reasons for this lack of awareness: why the young people believe women are so under-represented and whether or not they believed it
is important for there to be an increase in women's representation in Irish politics. There were a broad range of reasons provided by the young people. Individual reasons were highlighted by a small proportion of respondents. They believe that the under-representation of women is largely down to the women themselves lacking confidence and interest in politics to put themselves forward in the political arena. In response to the question as to why they believe there are so few women in Irish politics, one respondent replied “Perhaps women are not putting themselves forward. Women do not seem to have the same interest in politics as men do.” Some of the young people believed that the reason for women's under-representation was that women were not presented as candidates. One participant commented “Women are either not putting themselves forward or parties are not putting them forward because women can and do get elected so maybe if there were more women to vote for, there would be more elected”. There were a number of young people who laid the blame for women's under-representation in politics throughout Ireland with the parties themselves:

“Probably because parties are not taking action to increase their numbers. If they are not presented as candidates they cannot be elected so it is essentially down to the parties”.

These political and individual explanations were expressed by a considerable number of the participants from both the north and south. However social explanations made up the largest proportion of responses by young people. Although young people throughout Ireland gave similar general social explanations, the examples and situations they provided tended to be specific to their own jurisdiction. The presence of so few high profile women in politics was highlighted by young people as a reason for the general under-representation of women in Irish politics, with those respondents from the north pointing to women such as Arleen Foster and Anna Lo. For respondents from the south this was also an important reason: “Women like Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese have presented the view that women are successful in Irish politics”. Several of the young people from the south emphasised the fact that the young generation of voters in the Republic have grown up under two successive female Presidents of Ireland. Young people in the north and south believe this presence of a handful of high profile women in politics has disguised the problem of the under-representation of women, leading people to believe there are sufficient numbers of women in Irish politics.

The culture of society and politics was also emphasised by young people as an explanation for the under-representation of women. For the participants from Northern Ireland the political culture that has developed over the past thirty to forty years as a result of ‘the Troubles’ has hindered, and continues to hinder, women's political participation. Participants believed that there is no place for women amongst the conflict and violent culture associated with the political system. One participant responded:

“Politics in the north is dominated by the religious divide. Women could not survive in the political culture that has developed as a result of the troubles. Many in Northern Ireland would not have confidence in a woman trying to sort out the complex issues in Northern Irish politics”.
This view was a recurring one amongst a majority of respondents from the north, with another participant responding: “It is seen as a man’s world, women are not seen to be capable”. In the south, similar explanations were given relating to the culture of the political arena. Respondents pointed to the largely male dominated, patriarchal culture that has developed as a result of the influence of the Catholic Church in the state, with one respondent expressing the view promoted by the church that “women stay at home and men go out to work”.

Interestingly none of the interview participants identified finance as a reason for the low levels of women in Irish politics. Respondents equally failed to make any specific mention of the time restraints and family unfriendly working hours and conditions associated with a career in politics. Along with the lesser emphasis on candidate selection by respondents it is evident that there may be a general lack of knowledge surrounding the workings of the political system itself and the impact it can have on the representation of women. Participants may not be politically active, or have only recently become politically active. Therefore, they do not necessarily have a high level of awareness about political parties and their candidate selection processes and the impact they have on politics. The concentration of this younger generation on social explanations may be as a result of their small measure of engagement with the political process.

**Analysis of Young People’s Views**

The reasons specified above for the lack of awareness of the problem provide a vital insight into the cause of the problem. From the responses of young people, it is clear that there is not enough publicity given to the issue of women’s under-representation in Irish politics. Many participants reiterated the view that they believed there to be substantial numbers of women in politics because: “it has never been obvious that there was not”. This considerable lack of awareness of the problem of women’s political under-representation creates further problems for women’s representation. The young generation do not perceive there to be a problem with the current level of women’s representation. As a result of this, they do not hold the view that it is important to get more women into politics in Ireland. Although there were a proportion of participants who believed it was necessary to increase the level of women’s participation, believing that, “as there is roughly a 50-50 mix of each gender in society, it should be roughly the same in politics”, there was a large majority of young people who did not think it was not necessary to try to increase the number of women in politics. The general view was that the status quo should remain, with a significant number of participants supporting the view that “it is fine the way it is. Women wouldn’t do any better a job than men so there is no need to change it”.

**Increasing Women’s Participation in Politics**

Quotas, whether legal or voluntary, could provide an effective solution to increase the level of women in Irish politics. A greater effort on the part of the parties is also required to increase the level of women in Irish politics. It is necessary for parties to provide more training for aspiring women politicians and, undoubtedly, the
introduction into the political system of more family friendly working hours and conditions, such as in relation to childcare provisions, could drastically improve the level of interest, confidence and experience of women, encouraging more to pursue a career in politics. However, the outcome of the interviews suggests that ultimately a change in social attitudes is required. Even with an increase in women candidates, they still require the votes of the population and an increase in the awareness and knowledge of the situation regarding women in politics. This is arguably the most important requirement for an increase in the representation of women in Irish politics. More awareness and knowledge among the next generation of voters could potentially result in greater pressure placed on the parties to increase the opportunities for women and the number of women put forward as candidates. An extensive campaign with the backing of those high profile female politicians, who have unwittingly disguised the very problem of women's under-representation, and vitally with the support of a substantial number of male politicians could prove invaluable in attempts to increase the level of women's representation in Irish politics.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to examine the views of the young generation throughout Ireland in order to address the problem of the under-representation of women in Irish politics. Through the interviews, it became clear that there is undoubtedly a severe lack of knowledge among the younger generation in relation to the under-representation of women in politics in Ireland. However, it is important to recognise the drawbacks associated with this research. Such a small sample is not representative of the young population as a whole. Nonetheless, the results do are interesting and useful in highlighting general patterns of thinking. Of concern is the fact that a significant proportion of respondents believe that there are sufficient numbers of women in Irish politics and who do not perceive any benefit from an increase in the number of women politicians. This in itself is an explanation for the under-representation of women and presents a bleak outlook for the political future of women in Ireland. Such views and the general lack of awareness shown in the interviews puts no pressure on the parties to increase and promote female candidates or on society to embrace women's participation in politics.

While there were appropriate explanations for the under-representation of women in politics put forward by participants - which if addressed may help to improve the level of female participation in politics - the fact that generally these young people, who will have a considerable impact on the political outcome for years to come do not see a vital need for an increase in the number of women in politics in Ireland provides a very bleak outlook for women's involvement in politics in Ireland. Therefore the findings show that, despite the drawbacks associated with this research, it is worth further in-depth research with this age group more generally.