

#MOREWOMEN WE DARE. WE CAN. WE WILL.

It is now time for candidate gender quotas at local elections, at the same level as the general elections, according to Brian Sheehan, CEO of Women for Election. He claims that councils now need to be more pro-active, focussed and strategic over the next three years in identifying, informing and supporting women to consider local government and elections.

Fifty years ago, almost all of Iceland's women went on strike for a day to 'demonstrate the indispensable work of women to Iceland's economy and society'.

At the time there were just three women (5%) in the parliament with just 42 women out of 1,160 elected municipal government representatives (3.6%).

The women's 'day off' started a revolution that saw them taking their rightful places in politics, workplaces, business, across, society and, crucially, in local and national government.

Their slogan was 'I Dare. I Can. I Will' and their revolution delivered. For the last 16 years, Iceland has topped the world's global gender equality index. The country now has a women president; a women prime minister (she's 37!) with a coalition government of three parties headed by women; seven women in the 11-member cabinet; 29 women in the 63-member parliament while 51% women are in municipal government.

This level of equal representation of women in political decision-making matters. Apart from the natural justice of seeing one half of the population properly represented, women represent half the potential talent and skills of the population and their under-representation in decision-making is a loss for society as a whole.

A balanced participation of women and men in decision-making would produce different ideas, values and styles of behaviour suited to a fairer and more balanced world for all – according to the Athens Declaration of the Council of Europe. It's something that most of us readily recognise from our experiences in families, communities, workplaces and across society.

Within the context of the current nexus of crises – housing, cost of living, childcare, fuel and heating – women's perspectives are critical to shaping policies that reflect the realities of our society and economy. Their absence diminishes the strength of our local and national responses.



More women than ever before are now running in all elections, yet gender parity remains a long way off. Candidates pictured at the launch of Women for Election's '#VoteWomen' Campaign for the Local Elections on 19 May 2024. (Pic: Paul Sharp; courtesy of WfE).

LEARNING LESSONS FROM ICELAND

Recent research from the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership offers additional reasons why more women matter. Women politicians prioritise issues that benefit the most vulnerable in society, such as housing, communities, healthcare, welfare and education, and are key to better public service delivery.

Women leaders make for more equal and caring societies; they tend to bring collaborative and inclusive leadership styles into political environments that are often characterised by division and one-upmanship. In the current global context, it is useful to note that those states where women hold more political power are less likely to go to war.

Iceland is not immune to the crises either. However, they develop their solutions differently. There is state-provided childcare, mandatory gender budgeting at the state level and increasingly at municipal level; Iceland works on a well-being economy with indicators including healthy life years, unmet need for healthcare, work-life balance, job satisfaction, housing cost overburden, quality of housing and persistent poverty, rather than just fiscal benchmarks.



Women contested 679 seats in the last local elections in 2024 – a record number which represented 21% more than in 2019.



We Dare. We Can. We Will. Some of the record number of women who ran in LE2024. (Pic: Paul Sharp; courtesy of WfE).

It is at least arguable, and more likely more much material, that having a balance of women and men in politics making these crucial decisions shapes better outcomes for individuals and families, and for the public good.

IRELAND'S LOW EU RANKING

In Ireland, we have terrific women councillors – and indeed many women hold the positions of chief executives and senior management within local authorities across the country. Our problem is that we don't have enough of them!

Ireland ranks 22nd out of the EU27 for the number of women in the local government sector. We lag at 98th in the world for the number of women in parliament. We are the worst in Western Europe on both counts. The last Local Election in June 2024 (LE2024) put paid to any remaining notions that women didn't want to be in politics. More women ran than ever before, contesting 679 seats, 21% more than in the previous local election.

However, the outcomes were grim in terms of gender parity. Not one single additional woman was elected compared to the outgoing number of women councillors – with just 247 women elected. Twelve were women with migrant backgrounds. Just three councils

had 40% women elected representatives or more – South Dublin, Louth and Dublin City.

Donegal County Council was the lowest with just three women councillors elected (8%). A third of councils had 20% or less women councillors, including urban and rural councils. Thirty-two LEAs remain without any women representative.

The odds are stacked against women entering a political system that was designed primarily around men's lives 100 years ago. Women face many unique challenges, not least of which is incumbency. Roughly speaking, just over three quarters of seats go to incumbent councillors.

As women are under-represented among incumbents, organic change will take decades to deliver gender-balanced councils. Co-options increase women's participation, with now 260 women councillors following co-options after the Dáil and Seanad elections. However, is it good for politics or for our communities, or is it fair, to have to wait five more election cycles to approach gender parity in politics?

CANDIDATE GENDER QUOTAS

The two largest parties in local government fielded less than 30% women candidates in LE2024. Most other parties in the Dáil had 40% or more women candidates. There is no candidate quota in local elections, which is now a minimum of 40% men and 40% women in general elections.

It is time for candidate gender quotas at local elections, at the same level as the general election. If we are to have properly representative local government, we also need nested quotas or other mechanisms to ensure that those minority women in our communities, including Traveller women, migrant women, women of colour, disabled women – are properly represented in local government.

There certainly is not a shortage of talented, capable women in all their diversity who could bring their hugely valuable experience and expertise to city and county councils. These women are all around us; they're leading lights in their community organisations, business and local networks.

They're the organisers and can-doers that make communities thrive. Some are already connected to local government through PPNs and other bodies. We all instantly know of women about whom we say, 'she should be in politics!'

COUNCILS CAN SHIFT THE DIAL

This is where city and county councils can play a vitally important part. To shift the dial, councils will need to be more proactive, focussed and strategic over the next three years in identifying, informing and supporting women to consider local government and elections.

Organisations such as 'Women for Election' or 'See Her Elected' (both funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality) support women who are interested in running in the Local Elections in 2029.

While we're currently working with some councils, we are looking to partner with all councils to build on their work to encourage and empower more women to engage with local government – whether they run eventually or not.

It's now time to for political parties, local authorities and the Government to step up. There is a narrow window to the next Local Elections. Now that work needs to ramp up if there is to be material change, and we are to build a more effective local government that is fully representative and that truly serves the population's interests. We dare. We can. We will.



ABOUT WOMEN FOR ELECTION:

The non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation works to ensure equal representation of women and men in Irish politics at local, national and European levels. It works directly with women to inspire, equip and support them, in all their diversity, to enter and succeed in politics. Women for Election works with local authorities and other organisations to support their work in building a gender-balanced politics. For more information visit www.womenforelection.ie or email hello@womenforelection.ie



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Sheehan, CEO of Women for Election, has a background in politics and advocacy. He is a former general secretary of a political party, as co-director of the successful YES campaign in the Marriage Referendum and with GLEN (one of the main LGBTI advocacy organisations in Ireland).