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9 Women in politics

Yvonne Galligan and Fiona Buckley

Abstract

This chapter draws attention to gender and representative politics in Ireland. It begins by taking a detailed look at the pattern of women's representation in social and political decision-making. This is followed by an exploration of the causes of women's absence from public life and a discussion of the parliamentary representation of women's interests. The significant progress in relation to women's lives and women's political representation in Ireland since the 1990s is highlighted. Yet continuing gendered biases remain, stymieing women's advancement in public life while simultaneously privileging the male status quo. Furthermore, the need for a more inclusive and diverse politics is made. The chapter concludes with a general assessment of current patterns and future challenges.

Equality and justice, fundamental principles of democracy, were central arguments to the extension of the vote to women and right to stand in parliamentary elections in 1918. Campaigners of the time believed that this would lead to a gender-equal parliament. Yet, more than a century on from the adoption of these laws, women remain significantly under-represented in Irish politics. Even by 2023 the proportion of women in Dáil Éireann had yet to reach a modest 25 per cent, ensuring that the principles of justice and equality, and a focus on women's under-representation, remain relevant.

Irish parties have paid variable attention to the representative nature of parliament, perhaps reflecting a public indifference to the representative nature of the Dáil, as the 2011 and 2016 Irish National Election Surveys (INES) would seem to indicate. When asked what characteristics were important in a TD (such as being of the same social class, having the same level of education, being of the same age), being of the same gender as the respondent was the least important, though it was still somewhat more relevant for women than for men (Farrell et al. 2018: 192–3). Yet even though respondents attached little importance to the idea of having a TD of the same gender as themselves, the 2016 INES showed that 62 per cent of respondents believed that there should be more women TDs, with 29 per cent wanting no change and only 3 per cent saying they wanted fewer women in the Dáil (Farrell et al. 2018: 193). At the 2020 general election, 60 per cent of INES respondents felt not enough was being done to advance women's presence in Irish politics. The view that the share of women in politics should be increased was articulated in both the 2014 Constitutional Convention report, which examined the participation of women in politics, and the 2021 Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality, where the recommendations sought that the government take more action to encourage women's public and political engagement.

In this chapter, we draw attention to gender and representative politics and, in so doing, highlight the working of Irish democratic processes and practices from a viewpoint that adds nuance to the rich knowledge base provided by other perspectives. We begin the chapter by taking a detailed look at the pattern of women's representation in social and political decision-making. This is followed by an exploration of the causes of women's absence from public life and a discussion on the parliamentary representation of women's interests. We conclude with a general assessment of current patterns and future challenges.

Women in society

The dearth of women in positions of political power in Ireland is only part of the wider pattern of women's absence from, or under-representation in, many decision-making centres. Socio-cultural research confirms a link between socio-economic development and women's political empowerment (Alexander and Welzel 2011, 2015). Examining the social and economic environment is important for understanding the context that enables women's participation in politics (Alexander et al. 2016), as well as assessing the overall health of democracy from a gender-centred standpoint (Galligan 2017a).

The early years of the state saw the passage of discriminatory constitutional provisions and laws that restricted women's access to employment, accentuated their role within the home, banned birth control and facilitated the second-class status of women (Beaumont 1997). These included the extant Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 of the constitution:

- (1) In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
- (2) The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home¹.

As observed by Beaumont (1997: 563), both legislation and the constitution 'defined' women's citizenship 'in terms of their role as wives and mothers', a far cry from the ambition of 'equal rights and equal opportunities' as declared in the 1916 Proclamation of Independence. These measures did not pass uncontested, with groups and organisations such as the Women's Social and Progressive League, the National Union of Women Graduates' Association and the National Council of Women voicing opposition. Specific to Article 41.2, the Irish Women Workers' Union and the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers (Luddy 2005) argued that the decision to work outside the home was a personal matter for individual women and not a concern of the state (Beaumont 1997: 577). Éamon de Valera, President of the Executive Council (the term used for the prime minister until the constitution came into effect at the end of 1937) and the main author of the constitution, dismissed these objections arguing that 'the state pledges itself to have special care for the family. Everyone knows there is little chance of having a home in the real sense if there is no woman in it, the woman is really the home-maker' (cited in Beaumont 1997: 578).

By the 1970s, women's societal status and the valorisation of domesticity were being questioned and challenged (Galligan 1998; Connolly 2002). This period coincided with second-wave feminism in Ireland and the emergence of an influential women's lobby. Together with Ireland's

accession to the European Economic Community (the EU) in 1973, these events played a significant role in the lifting of restrictions on women's employment, the passage of legislation outlawing unequal pay and the removal of the marriage bar that had legally obliged women working in the public service to leave their jobs on marriage (while the bar did not apply to the private or semi-state sectors, many employers in these sectors also included a marriage bar clause in their contracts of employment). Women's agency and activism, oftentimes manifested through legal cases, as well as the influence of supranational actors such as the EU, became the key drivers of societal change for women in Ireland, a trend that continues to this day. In subsequent decades, the labour force participation of women increased from 28 per cent in the early 1970s (Russell, McGinnity & O'Connell 2017: 406) to 59 per cent in 2022 (CSO 2022a). Thus, one of the background reasons for women's political under-representation – their low participation in employment outside the home – became less relevant over time.

However, there continues to be a bias towards traditional gender roles in relation to caring responsibilities. The CSO's Women and Men in Ireland Report 2019 showed that employment rates² of women and men, aged 20–44 with no children, were relatively the same at 88 per cent and 92 per cent respectively (CSO 2020). However, the figure falls to 67 per cent for women when their youngest child is aged three years or under. The comparable figure for men is 90 per cent, exposing a gender gap of 23 percentage points and revealing that men's employment rate is largely unaffected by parenthood (CSO 2020). Compared to other EU member states, as of 2022, Ireland registers one of the lowest employment rates for women aged 25–49; just Slovakia, Romania, Spain, Greece and Italy have lower rates (Eurostat 2022a).

Childcare in Ireland is predominantly provided by the private sector and was estimated to cost a minimum of €900 per month for crèche fees and €800 per month for after-school care in 2021 (Brennan and McConnell 2021). While some parents rely on relatives for childcare support, this option is not open to all. It is little surprise, then, that some parents opt out of full-time employment in response to childcare needs. This care work largely falls on women to perform, reinscribing traditional gender roles in Ireland. It has been argued that the lack of a publicly funded system of childcare provision in Ireland today can be directly linked back to the cultural mindset of the 1930s, and the political and patriarchal philosophy directed that women were not expected to work outside the home, thereby exonerating the state of its responsibilities in the provision of childcare supports (Brennan and McConnell 2021).

Many women balance family life and paid work outside the home by engaging in part-time employment. In 2020, the proportion of part-time workers among women employed was 27 per cent; the respective figure for men was just over 8 per cent. When asked the reason for working part-time, close to 62 per cent of women respondents cited 'care of adults with disabilities/children or other family/personal reasons' as the main reason. Based on data from 2018, the Gender Norms in Ireland Report also showed that a greater proportion of women (23 per cent) than men (17 per cent) were classified as low-wage earners and across the 2016–2020 period, the proportion of women earning the national minimum wage or less was consistently higher than men (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth [DCEDIY] 2021: 21). The varied pattern of women's engagement with the workforce, as compared with men's continuous employment

patterns, as well as the fact that women are more likely to be classified as low earners, goes some way to explaining the persistence of a gender pay gap, measuring 11 per cent in 2018 (Eurostat 2022b). To monitor the gender pay gap in Ireland, and seek its elimination, the Gender Pay Gap Information Act, 2021 was adopted, legally obliging organisations employing 250 or more employees to report on this matter annually and make plans to address gender pay discrepancies found.³

A wider review of women in Irish society reveals that women have made significant inroads in the professions in recent years. This is especially evident in the areas of law enforcement and justice. In July 2022, a majority of leadership positions in An Garda Síochána (police) were held by women (O’Keeffe 2022) while in March 2017 the Minister for Justice, Attorney General, Chief State Solicitor, Garda Commissioner, Director of Public Prosecutions, Chief Justice and chairperson of the Policing Authority were all women. Data from 2021 and 2022 shows that 53 per cent of practising solicitors and 36 per cent of all barristers were women (Law Society 2021a; Bar of Ireland 2022). Over a third of all judges were women in 2022, up from 23 per cent in 2009 (Courts Service 2022).

The public sector is a key employer of women in Ireland, offering job security and flexibility. In 2017, women made up 73 per cent of the public sector employees, yet their presence is not uniform across all grades and ‘falls sharply the further up the occupational ladder’ one examines (Russell et al. 2017: 2). A 2018 snapshot of the proportion of women and men in the Irish civil service showed that while 73 per cent of clerical officers were women, only 12 per cent of secretary general positions were held by women (see Figure 9.1).

<COMP: Place Figure 9.1 Here>

In 2017 measures were announced to address the under-representation of women at the senior levels of the civil service whereby ‘where candidates compete for such positions and are of equal merit at the final stage of a competition, priority is given to the female candidate should that gender be under-represented on the Management Board of the Department/Office in question’ (Dáil Debates 1018: 7, Question No. 269, 1 March 2022). The measure has been effective and as of June 2022, the proportion of Secretary General positions held by women has increased to 33 per cent.

Considerable progress has been made in gender balancing state boards. In November 2022, 54 per cent of state board members were men while 46 per cent were women (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2022). This exceeds the target of 40 per cent for women’s state board membership set by government as far back as 1993. However, these overall proportions mask the variation in gender representation across boards. As of 2022, four of the 199 state boards had no women members, and these boards were largely in sectoral areas dominated by a male workforce such as the Galway Harbour Company and the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority. Another two boards had less than 20 per cent female representation: the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board and the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board. There is also an uneven distribution of board chair positions: 67 per cent of boards were chaired by men while only 33 per cent were chaired by women.

In Irish companies, close to 30 per cent of senior executive positions are held by women, yet women's share of positions falls off at each subsequent senior grade (DCEDIY 2021: 30). In 2021, just 13 per cent of Irish companies were headed by a female chief executive. Women's representation on the boards of the largest publicly listed companies remains low too. Eurostat data shows that in 2020 just 29 per cent of corporate board members in Ireland were women in 2020, though even this marked an increase from 9 per cent in 2012 (DCEDIY 2021: 33). To address women's under-representation in this sector, an EU 'women on boards' directive was agreed by the European Parliament and the Council in June 2022 to ensure 40 per cent of non-executive directors are women and 33 per cent of all directors are women by July 2026. In Ireland a potential pool of suitably qualified women is available to fill these positions as evidenced in the proportion of female graduates. Women accounted for 55 per cent of all graduates in 2020 (Higher Education Authority [HEA] 2022a). However, an examination of the academic profession in 2021 revealed that while gender balance existed at lecturer level (52 per cent women and 48 per cent men), just 30 per cent of professors were women (HEA 2022b). To address the lack of women in senior levels of academia, the Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) was launched in June 2019 by the Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell-O'Connor TD, 'to assist in accelerating gender balance in senior levels of academia' (HEA 2022c). Separately, since August 2020, there has been an historic change in the Irish university sector. After over 400 years of all-male higher education leadership in Ireland, women comprised 44 per cent of presidents/provosts in 2022 (HEA 2022b).

As the preceding sections demonstrate, there has been significant legislative change, policy reform and promotion of gender equality in Irish society, with particular activity in the period 2018–21 (see Table 9.1). One of the most overt signals of the advancement of women's rights was the repeal of the eighth amendment to the constitution in a referendum in 2018 (see Chapter 7, pp. 000–00). Yet, despite these changes, data shows a bias towards traditional gender roles and some prevailing gendered attitudes. In 2021, women spent close to twice as much time on unpaid care and domestic work as men (20.5 hours per week compared with 11.3 hours per week for men) and in assessing attitudes towards the traditional 'breadwinner norm', the Gender Norms in Ireland Report highlights that 39 per cent of the population believed that the most important role of a man is to earn money while 52 per cent believed the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family (DCEDIY 2021). Furthermore, 12 per cent believe that it is acceptable in some circumstances to pay men more than women for the same job (which is four percentage points higher than the EU average). Attitudes like these confirm that there is no room for complacency in efforts to advance gender equality in Ireland.

<COMP: Place Table 9.1 Here>

A Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality was established by the government in 2019 to consider ongoing gender-based inequalities. The Assembly met across 2020 and 2021 and made 45 recommendations for change across nine areas: care; social protection; leadership (in politics, public life and the workplace); norms and stereotypes; education; pay and workplace conditions; domestic, sexual and gender-based violence; the constitution; and law and policy (see the Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality for a full list of recommendations).⁴

The establishment of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, a period in which the lived experience of many women worsened, due to a national enforced home isolation as an infection prevention measure. Both the Gardaí and Women's Aid, a national organisation offering support to women and children affected by domestic violence, recorded increases in domestic abuse reports during lockdown. A report commissioned by the European Parliament's Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) Committee on the gendered impacts of the pandemic within the EU found that in opposite sex couples, both women and men were conducting more domestic labour during lockdown, yet women were still undertaking a greater share of this work (31 per cent more hours of unpaid care work than men) (Wenham 2020: 32). Furthermore, across the world, the rise of authoritarian populism has seen a row-back back of women's rights revealing that progress in women's rights is subject to reversal, and advances made are not guaranteed.

Women in political institutions

In the late nineteenth century, Irish women campaigning for the vote saw it as the key to increasing women's influence in national life. The Irish suffrage movement, strongly influenced by the women's franchise campaign in Britain, sought to bring a feminist voice to Irish politics. However, the strengthening independence movement led to this aim being joined, and arguably overshadowed, by the demand for national sovereignty promoted by prominent Sinn Féin women (Cullen 1997: 272). The dominance of the nationalist discourse over that of feminism is important in understanding the low representation of women subsequent to independence. While winning the vote in 1918 was presented as a victory for feminists in Britain, the extension of the franchise to women in Ireland was interpreted as a step on the way to self-government. From this point on, women's place in political life was linked to their association with the 'national question', and among the few women who made it to political office in the post-1918 elections, many had a personal link to the revolutionary period, through either direct involvement or a family connection (Galligan 2017b: 159–63). However, the election of six women in 1921 proved to be a high point for women's representation in Dáil Éireann for half a century. It would take until the 1977 general election for the feat to be achieved again. In the following sections, we trace the participation of women in Irish political life, primarily in the post-1977 period, focusing on their representation in national and local politics, and their involvement in political parties (Figure 9.2).

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National level

When people are asked to reflect on the role of women in Irish politics, the names of Constance Markievicz, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese come to mind. Their accomplishments serve as milestones in the history of women's political representation in Ireland. Constance Markievicz was the first woman elected to the House of Commons following the extension of suffrage in 1918, though as an abstentionist Sinn Féin MP, she did not take her seat. Instead, she became a member of the first Dáil and in April 1919 was appointed Secretary of Labour. It would take another sixty years before a woman held cabinet office when Máire Geoghegan-Quinn was appointed Minister for the Gaeltacht in 1979. This makes Geoghegan-

Quinn the first woman to serve in government since the foundation of the state in 1921. Mary Robinson's election as the country's first female president in 1990 made Ireland only the second country in Europe (after Iceland) to have a woman head of state elected by popular vote. In 1997, Mary McAleese became the first woman in the world to follow another woman into the office of elected head of state (see Appendix 4 for biographical details of leading political figures). These achievements placed women firmly on the political map in Ireland and brought international recognition to the country for the advancement of women in politics. But their very noteworthiness underlines the reality that women have been grossly under-represented in Irish politics. Of the 1,342 people elected to Dáil Éireann in the 103 years between 1918 and 2021 inclusive, just 131 (10 per cent) were women.

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As demonstrated in Figure 9.2, there has been slow progress in relation to women's political representation since the late 1970s. This slow pace of change drew attention from international observers. In their comments on Ireland's progress under the UN's Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2005, the UN expressed concern about the 'significant under-representation of women in elected political structures, particularly in the Oireachtas' (United Nations 2005: 8). It encouraged the state 'to take sustained measures to increase the representation of women in elected bodies' (United Nations 2005: 8). Yet, despite much rhetoric about the need for more women in politics, politicians and political parties largely shied away from advocating equality measures such as gender quotas, preferring instead the softer strategy of gender targets (Galligan and Wilford 1999; Buckley 2013).

The economic downturn of 2008 was a catalyst for change. In the febrile political atmosphere that followed the banking and financial crisis, there were ubiquitous demands for political reform.⁶ Oireachtas committees⁷ were established to review the political system. To address the under-representation of women in politics, proposals to introduce gender-balancing mechanisms in candidate selection processes were made, recommending that state funding of political parties be tied to the proportion of women candidates. These recommendations were to be pivotal in the legislation that followed (Buckley 2013; Brennan et al. 2022). In May 2011 the Fine Gael–Labour coalition government announced its intention to link the public funding of political parties to the proportion of women candidates selected at general elections. Part six of the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act, 2012 incentivised political parties to select women candidates by specifying that payments to political parties 'shall be reduced by 50 per cent, unless at least 30 per cent of the candidates whose candidatures were authenticated by the qualified party at the preceding general election were women and at least 30 per cent were men'. The 30 per cent gender threshold came into effect at the 2016 general election and after March 2023 the figure rose to 40 per cent. The gender quota applies at general elections only.

Since the law's inception, women's candidacy at general elections has increased by 90 per cent while women's election to the Dáil increased by 48 per cent. Even though women accounted for just 23 per cent of all TDs in 2022, 'the gender quota has accelerated the pace of increase' (Brennan et al. 2022). A seven percentage point increase in women's Dáil representation was achieved between 2011 and 2016, following the first rollout of the legislative gender quota. What was

achieved in one electoral cycle across five years, previously, took 19 years to achieve. Yet gender parity is a long way off. When comparing the proportion of women in Dáil Éireann with that of the lower houses of parliament in other EU member states in 2023, the Dáil emerges as one of the least gender-balanced legislatures – 22nd out of 27 – and falls well behind the EU median of 32 per cent.

Male domination of Irish politics is also clear to see when reviewing government officeholding. Just 26 per cent of ministerial positions were held by women in 2020, although this was quite an improvement on 4 per cent in 1977. When women are appointed to the cabinet in Ireland, a gendered pattern is evident in the ministerial portfolios assigned to them. Drawing on an extensive feminist literature, Krook and O'Brien (2012: 844) categorised cabinet posts as 'masculine' or 'feminine' according to

whether they touched on concerns tied to the public sphere of politics and the economy... and have been historically associated with men ... or to the private sphere of home and the family, including care and education, and have been linked closely to women.

In Ireland, men are 1.4 times more likely to be assigned a masculine-coded portfolio than women while women are 2.7 times more likely to be assigned a feminine-coded portfolio than men.

According to Connolly (2013: 376), the continuing tendency to engage in gender clustering of ministerial portfolios in Ireland is high by international standards. Given that ministerial appointments are made within the context of party interests and dynamics, Connolly (2013) argues that the type of portfolio assigned to women is a function of their position within their parties, as well as the gendered ethos of those parties, party leaders and government, rather than a conscious act of discrimination. Yet, the gendered impact of those cabinet appointment decisions was evidently clear and keenly felt during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, leader of the Green Party (coalition partner), Minister for Finance, Minister for Public Expenditure and Minister for Health were all men, meaning there was no woman on the powerful cabinet Covid-19 committee. The lack of women's voices and lived experiences at the decision-making table during the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in heavy criticism of the government and its decisions (see Covid Women's Voices).⁸ However, a comparative overview of Ireland's response to Covid-19 highlighted the central role played by the Department of Social Protection, headed by Heather Humphreys, in designing fiscal policies replacing employment income and the close collaboration between the Irish government and women's non-governmental organisations in responding to pandemic-intensified effects on women and families (Cibin et al. 2021: 22, 38).

Box 9.1 Firsts for women in politics, 1918–2020

1918: Women over 30 entitled to vote for the first time in parliamentary elections; first woman elected (Constance Markievicz, Sinn Féin)

1919: First woman government minister (Constance Markievicz), though the position was largely symbolic as Ireland was not self-governing

1923: Votes for all women

1937: First woman party leader (Margaret Buckley, Sinn Féin)

1969: First woman on a parliamentary committee (Evelyn Owens, Labour)

1977: First woman junior minister since foundation of the state (Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, Fianna Fáil)

1979: First woman government minister since the foundation of the state (Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, Fianna Fáil)

1982: First woman Cathaoirleach (speaker) of the Seanad (Tras Honan, Fianna Fáil)

1982: First woman chairperson of a parliamentary committee (Nora Owen, Fine Gael)

1990: First woman president (Mary Robinson)

1993: First women leader of a party with Dáil representation (Mary Harney, PDs)

1997: First woman Tánaiste (Mary Harney, PDs)

2011: First woman Attorney General (Máire Whelan)

2016: First openly gay women to be appointed cabinet minister (Katherine Zappone, Independent)

2019: First elected black woman public representative (Cllr Yemi Adenuga, Fine Gael)

2020: First time no constituency experienced an all-male slate of candidates at a general election

2020: First Traveller woman to serve in the Oireachtas (Independent Senator Eileen Flynn)

Local government

The pattern of women's representation in local government is similar to that at the national level. Women's local council representation has been consistently low, reaching a modest 24 per cent following the 2019 local election. This wide gap in gender representation on local councils is relevant as local government service is one of the main routes to national politics. Buckley et al. (2015: 311) find that 'previous experience in local office is a key springboard to higher office for men and women, and when women serve in local government the likelihood of election increases significantly'. However, men dominate local councils (see Table 9.2), meaning that fewer women than men have an opportunity to acquire the political experience and networks essential for candidate selection and election at the national level (Buckley et al. 2015).

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The legislative gender quota does not apply at local elections. However, there are signs of a quota diffusion effect, as local elections are seen as an important recruitment opportunity and pipeline for women's candidacy and election in subsequent Dáil elections. Women's candidacy at local elections has increased from 314 in 2009 to 560 in 2019, a 78 per cent increase, and at the 2014 and 2019 local elections, most parties achieved and/or surpassed 30 per cent women's candidacy. However, in both elections, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did not, indicating that in the absence of a legislative gender quota for local elections, some parties are dissuaded in their efforts to gender

balance their election tickets. Patterns of party behaviour of this kind have led to calls for an extension of the legislative gender quota to local elections (see, for example, the Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality).

Gendered institutions

At both the national and local levels, directly and indirectly, the advent of candidate gender quotas has seen more women enter public life in Ireland. As they do, the gendered nature of the profession of politics is exposed, sharply highlighted in the lack of maternity leave for public representatives. While Ireland is not alone in this regard, it is increasingly at odds with other countries that have adopted measures to formalise maternity and parental leave for parliamentarians. Such efforts are in recognition of the fact that parliaments are gendered institutions whose rules, practices and processes were in many cases formulated at a time when women were not even permitted to run for political office (Acker 1990). There is a general acceptance that it is no longer appropriate or feasible to expect women to 'fit' the practices of political institutions but, rather, political institutions must change, as the lack of maternity leave is a barrier to women's political participation. In June 2022, the Irish government gave its approval for the drafting of a legislative provision to enable councillors to access maternity leave under the Maternity Protection Act 1994. As councillors are officeholders rather than employees, 'they are not covered by the statutory framework for employees on issues such as maternity leave' (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage [DHLGH] 2022). Under the scheme, local councillors 'will be entitled to the same rights as female employees' to avail of maternity leave and be offered the choice to appoint a temporary substitute in their absence (DHLGH 2022).

At the national level, the Oireachtas (Ministerial and Parliamentary Offices) (Secretarial Facilities) Regulations 2021 provides additional secretarial facilities, up to a period of 26 weeks, for Oireachtas members, on 'medical certification of pregnancy and otherwise'⁹ but work still continues on the provision of a formal maternity leave for ministers, TDs and senators. In the absence of such a provision, the government came to an arrangement in March 2021 to facilitate Helen McEntee, Minister for Justice, to undertake a period of six months of paid maternity leave from April to October 2021. This included Minister McEntee remaining a member of the government but without a portfolio. The responsibilities of the Justice portfolio were reassigned to another cabinet minister and a minister of state. Helen McEntee was the first woman to have a baby while serving in cabinet. In announcing the maternity leave arrangements, the Taoiseach Micheál Martin acknowledged that permanent reform is required as the current legal framework is based on 'completely outdated assumptions and attitudes' (Law Society 2021b). In November 2021, the Report of the Forum on Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament (Houses of the Oireachtas 2021) made a number of recommendations to improve the family-friendly practices of all representatives elected to public office, as well as those working within the environs of Leinster House, including recommendations on the provision of maternity leave; the development of a formal pairing arrangement for those unable to attend parliamentary votes due to maternity leave, parental leave and sick leave; the holding of a constitutional referendum to introduce proxy voting for those absent due to certified leave; and hybrid work arrangements.

Political parties

International experience indicates that it takes at least three electoral cycles for gender quotas to be bed into the electoral system and party candidate selection procedures. While political parties formally supported the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012, grassroots resistance to the gender quota provision emerged in the course of selection conventions for the 2016 general election. Despite these challenges, the notable fact is that across the three main political parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin) just 11 directives from party headquarters, specifying the gender of the candidates to be selected, were issued. A talking point of the 2020 general election was that it was the first time in the history of the state that no constituency presented an all-male slate of candidates, however, the fact that it took until 2020 to achieve this serves to underline the slow pace of change in Irish politics. Unlike 2016, meeting the gender quota requirement encountered much less difficulty in 2020 (Reidy 2021: 44), yet both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael intervened post-selection convention to add women to party tickets (Buckley and Galligan 2020: 607).

The conditions that shape women's access into politics are gendered and intersect with other individual-level characteristics, including socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, ableness, migrant status, sexuality and age. The Report of the Forum on Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament recommended that political parties set targets for ethnic minority women within their gender quotas (Recommendation 38) but if this cannot be achieved through the actions of political parties, then legislative action will be required. The Seanad Public Consultation Committee Report on Travellers Towards a More Equitable Ireland Post-Recognition called for the setting of 'targets for Traveller women in mainstream gender quotas, party political gender quotas and State agency quotas' (Seanad Éireann 2020: 10), while research by the National Traveller Women's Forum (NTWF) and AkiDwA (a national network of migrant women living in Ireland), in consultation with Pauline Cullen and Shane Gough (2022), recommended legislating for a paired quota, to require candidate selection procedures to consider gender and minority status simultaneously. In its 2022 policy document 'Enabling Participation: Supporting the Involvement of Disabled People in Political Parties', the Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI) called for the establishment of dedicated funding to support the candidacies of disabled people as 'they face additional costs due to impairment related barriers that non-disabled people do not need to consider' (ILMI 2022: 2). Similar funding schemes have worked well in other jurisdictions to 'encourage the participation of disabled people in elections' (ILMI 2022: 2), for example, the UK's EnAble Fund for Elected Office. These activities align with the focus of fourth-wave feminism (emergent from 2012 onwards), which emphasises women's empowerment, interlocking systems of power, and a greater representation for marginalised women and groups in politics and business.

Research indicates that party service enhances women's electoral ambitions, mainly through socialising prospective candidates into the norms and rules of political decision-making, providing future candidates with a profile within the party and enabling party leaders to evaluate the electoral potential of senior female party members (Kittilson 2006). The baseline for women's membership of political parties has increased from 25 per cent to 30 per cent since the 1990s, with women comprising between 31 and 51 per cent of party members in 2022 (data supplied to authors by political parties). Where data was supplied on constituency officeholding within political parties, women's share of these posts ranged between 30 and 35 per cent. However, data on national level

officeholding tells a more positive story (see Table 9.3). The median figure was 40 per cent, with the two main parties of government having the lowest proportions. Furthermore, of the nine parties with representation in Dáil Éireann¹⁰ in September 2022, four were led by women.

Awareness of the need to support women seeking political office is also growing. Non-partisan organisations such as Women for Election and See Her Elected encourage women's candidacy through capacity-building programmes and mentoring. Political parties engage with these organisations and support their members to avail of training. However, party expenditure on the promotion of women remains low. In 2021, this was less than 4 per cent of party expenditure.¹¹

<COMP: Place Table 9.3 Here>

Harassment, intimidation and abuse of public representatives, online and in person, are unfortunate realities of political life in Ireland, as in most countries. Research by Felle et al. (2020) revealed that in Ireland, 96 per cent of current and former women politicians interviewed had received social media and/or electronic messages that used foul language or made an inappropriate comment about their appearance and intelligence; 73 per cent had been threatened with physical violence via social media; 38 per cent had been threatened with rape or sexual violence; and some 28 per cent said that they had been verbally abused in public. Furthermore, in May 2021, the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG 2021) reported on a survey of councillors that found that 72 per cent of respondents (women and men) had experienced threats, intimidation and harassment in the previous three years. Threats included death threats, threats of violence and threats of sexual violence. Sometimes, the threats were directed at family members. Some 33 per cent of respondents experienced threats in face-to-face settings while 60 per cent of respondents experienced threats via social media. In an examination of tweets directed at Irish public representatives, Richardson (2022) found that women in local government received eight times more online abuse than their male counterparts, while women in the Seanad were subjected to three times more abusive tweets than male Senators. The study identified no significant difference in the level of abusive tweets directed at women and men in the Dáil. The consequences of online abuse are underlined by research on Swedish MPs by Erikson et al. (2021: 1) who find that 'men exposed to high levels of online abuse seem slightly more inclined to leave politics whereas women report that they feel that their personal agency is circumscribed to a greater extent'.

There have been calls on political parties to offer support to party members experiencing such harassment and intimidation, and calls on parliaments to introduce legislation to tackle such abuse. In her summary of recommendations by organisations including the UN, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the EU, the Council of Europe and the Organisation of American States, Verge (2022: 98–100) highlights that all have recommended 'introducing legislation on violence against women in politics or incorporating specific provisions into existing laws on eliminating violence against women, including criminalisation and prosecution of online violence'. In October 2022, a man received a one-year suspended sentence after pleading guilty to the online harassment of TD and Minister of State, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. Following the sentencing hearing, Deputy Carroll MacNeill urged other women experiencing online harassment to bring their concerns to An Gardaí.

Box 9.2 Leading women politicians

Irish politics has been largely male-dominated since the foundation of the state. Only since the late 1970s have women politicians gained access to any of the levers of power. Some of the prominent women in Irish politics are listed below; in the case of those marked with an asterisk, full biographical details can be found in Appendix 4, pp. 000–00.

Mary Robinson* (born 1944) in 1990 became the first woman to be elected President; she had the backing of Labour, the Workers' Party and the Green Party.

Mary McAleese* (born 1951) was elected president in 1997, standing as the Fianna Fáil candidate with the support also of the Progressive Democrats. She was returned unopposed for a second term in 2004.

Máire Geoghegan-Quinn (born 1950) was appointed to cabinet in 1979. She was the first woman to hold such office since the largely symbolic appointment of Constance Markievicz to cabinet in 1919. She was TD for Galway West from 1975 until her retirement from electoral politics in 1997. During her time in politics, she held various ministries, including Gaeltacht, Transport and Communications and Justice. After national politics she went on to have a prominent career in Europe, serving on the European Court of Auditors between 2000 and 2010 and as EU Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science between 2010 and 2014.

Mary Harney* (born 1953) was the first woman appointed Tánaiste in 1997. Originally a member of Fianna Fáil, she left the party in 1985 and became a founding member of the Progressive Democrats, which she led from 1993 to 2006.

Mary O'Rourke (born 1937) was a Fianna Fáil TD for the constituencies of Longford–Westmeath and Westmeath between 1982 and 2002 and again from 2007 to 2011. During her time in national politics she served in a number of cabinet ministries, including Education, Health and Public Enterprise. She was the first woman to serve as deputy leader of Fianna Fáil.

Joan Burton* (born 1949) was first elected as a Labour TD for Dublin West in 1992, and though she lost her seat in 1997 she regained it in 2002 and held it until 2020. In 2014 she became the first woman to be elected leader of the Labour Party and the third woman to be appointed Tánaiste.

Frances Fitzgerald* (born 1950) served as a Fine Gael TD for 18 years, as a minister and as Tánaiste (2016–17). She was elected to the European Parliament in 2019.

Katherine Zappone (born 1953) was elected an independent TD for Dublin South-West in 2016. In May 2016 she was appointed Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, becoming the first openly gay woman to serve in cabinet in Ireland and only the sixth person to hold a ministry as a first-time TD in the history of the state. She lost her seat in 2020 and retired from political life.

Ivana Bacik (born 1968) represented the Dublin University constituency in the Seanad from 2007 until she became a Labour TD for the Dublin Bay South constituency in 2021. In March 2022 she became Labour party leader. A social justice advocate and lawyer, Bacik is known for her campaigning since the 1980s to remove the constitutional ban on abortion.

Mary Lou McDonald* (born 1969) has represented the Dublin Central constituency since 2011. She succeeded Gerry Adams as President of Sinn Féin in 2018 and in 2020 became the first female Leader of the Opposition in the Dáil.

Holly Cairns (born 1989) is a TD for Cork South-West and in March 2023 became leader of the Social Democrats party.

Causes of the under-representation of women

So far we have examined the extent of the under-representation of women in politics and other centres of decision-making, by considering the wider socio-cultural environment that shapes women's participation in Irish politics. We now look at other possible reasons for this under-representation. In doing so we will discuss some of the factors that have acted as barriers to women's participation in public life, beginning with political culture. We follow this with a review of party selection practices to assess the extent of gender inequality in party institutional structures. We then outline the barriers that women face in creating a local presence, which is an essential first step to a career in politics.

Political culture

To understand women's under-representation in politics in Ireland, one needs to understand Irish political culture (see Chapter 2 for a general overview). The turbulent decades at the beginning of the twentieth century afforded women the opportunity to integrate a feminist consciousness within nationalism. But, as noted in the earlier pages of this chapter, the policies and laws of the new state unravelled women's status as equal citizens, and bestowed on men a patriarchal dividend (Connell 1996) that reinforced their dominant position in the gender order in Irish society (Buckley et al. 2013).

The influence of Roman Catholic teachings conveyed a traditional view of women's social role and prioritised home and family-based duties (Randall and Smyth 1987). The role of wife and mother was valorised, essentially marginalising women from the public sphere. These socially conservative views shaped attitudes towards women in politics, as is evident in some male politicians' comments on women politicians that were acceptable at the time. Laffan (2014: 166) notes that when republican women campaigned against William T. Cosgrave's re-election as president of the executive council in 1923, he is reported to have said they 'should have rosaries in their hands or be at home with knitting needles'. Similarly, Ferriter (2008: 189) recounts the views of Kerry Fianna Fáil TD Timothy O'Connor who, when asked for his thoughts on women's participation in politics in a Women's Political Association survey in 1977, observed 'in my own county the women are doing a great job of work in keeping their homes going and bringing up their families. This I think is just what Almighty God intended them to do'.

Faced with such attitudes, it is not surprising that so few women put themselves forward for election in the period between 1922 and 1977. During this time just 24 women were elected to Dáil Éireann, 80 per cent of whom were related to a former male TD. Women were heavily reliant on male networks to enter politics, an access route that Galligan et al. (2000) describe as the 'widow's and daughter's inheritance'. As the previous discussion shows, there was a perceptible

increase in the number of women contesting and winning Dáil elections between 1977 and 1992, with the proportion of women candidates and TDs increasing threefold, though from a low base (see Figure 9.2). Progress stagnated after this period of growth, even though the post-1992 period was a time of greater equality for women and the growing feminisation of the workforce, factors usually associated with increased women's participation in politics (Buckley et al. 2015). Nonetheless, as noted earlier, gendered attitudes on the roles of women and men still prevail. It is no surprise, then, to find that for mothers with political ambitions, the practicality of pursuing this time-consuming career in tandem with child-rearing is an issue of greater significance than it is for their male colleagues. Data from a comprehensive survey of women legislators in 2000 pointed to family responsibilities as the most significant source of difficulty in pursuing a political career – demands that are exacerbated when a public representative is from a constituency outside Dublin (Galligan et al. 2000). Twenty years on, research published by Women for Election confirmed this to be still the case (Buckley and Keenan 2021). It indicates the continuing influence of traditional attitudes towards the public role of women in Ireland. However, culture is just one of the causes of the under-representation of women in Irish politics and, indeed, cannot solely explain why early gains in women's political representation were not continued in the following years (Buckley et al. 2015). The general political culture also influences party candidate selection procedures and how they interact with informal institutional dynamics such as localism to stymie women's access into politics.

Candidate selection

In general, research finds that there is no bias against women in Irish elections (McElroy 2018; Keenan and Brennan 2021), although McElroy's examination of the 2016 general election showed that Fianna Fáil voters did seem to prefer male candidates, a finding confirmed for the 2020 election too, by Keenan and Marsh (2023). This pattern has been consistent since the 1970s, meaning that explanations for women's political under-representation have focused more on internal party selection processes as the single most important obstacle to women's political participation (Elgood et al. 2002). As the gatekeepers to political office, political parties exercise considerable influence on the extent of women's candidacy. Studies suggest that all variants of proportional representation, including PR-STV, have the potential to increase female candidatures compared with electoral systems based on single-member constituencies (Matland and Taylor 1997; Kaminsky and White 2007; McGing 2013; Buckley et al. 2014: 473). However, as constituency size at Irish elections is relatively small, ranging from three to five seats (see Chapter 4), this encourages political parties to favour established and incumbent candidates. At the 2011 general election, prior to the introduction of the legislative gender quota, women's candidacy across Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and the Greens averaged just 19 per cent. This contrasted with an average rate of 34 per cent for women's party membership at that time. Of course, not all party women (or men) will put themselves forward for selection at conventions, but the gap between women's membership and candidacy rates indicated a selection bias in favour of men.

Viewing candidate selection in this way uncovers the gendered underpinnings of the informal practices that guide this institutional process. Emphasis is placed on localness and incumbency, characteristics that tend to favour 'local sons' (Kenny 2013). Developing a local base and network

requires time and money. In her comprehensive review of over 500 studies examining gender, women and politics, Cowper-Coles (2020: 35) observes that ‘entering politics...[and] running an election campaign, is costly in terms of money and time and men tend to... have greater access to resources than women’. As women continue to be the primary care providers in Irish families, they have fewer opportunities to amass the key political resources of time and money to develop local bases and fund campaigns. Likewise, the electoral benefits brought by incumbency disadvantage women. Incumbency confers instant name recognition and a track record on the bearers, garnering them levels of support, including fundraising for campaigns, that challengers find difficult to muster (Benoit and Marsh 2008; Buckley and Mariani 2023). Given that most incumbents are men, women candidates operate at a disadvantage in both selection and election contests.

To address this gender inequality in candidate selection processes, since 2012, political parties are legally bound to implement a gender quota when selecting candidates to contest general elections. The selection of women candidates in this context has led to claims that women are unmerited candidates, selected solely because of their gender rather than political experience. However, such arguments ‘tend to ignore the fact that where inexperience exists, it is a legacy of men’s domination of political office’ and the gendered nature of society (Buckley and Galligan 2020: 610). Taking existing political officeholding as a measure of experience, Buckley et al. (2016: 192) show that in 2016 some 49 per cent of women candidates were not officeholders at the time of the general election in comparison to 40 per cent of male candidates, while the respective data for the 2020 general election was similar – 50 per cent of women and 42 per cent of men did not hold political office at the point of candidate selection. Yet, male candidates are rarely, if ever, subjected to the gendered tropes of being unmerited candidates, despite the fact that not all men contesting election are experienced.

Examining the issue of political experience and gender quotas more deeply, Mariani et al. (2021) demonstrate that female non-incumbents selected by Fine Gael at the 2016 general election were less experienced than their counterparts selected to contest the 2007 and 2011 general elections while female non-incumbents running for both Fine Gael and Labour in 2016 were significantly more likely to contest non-competitive races when compared to their counterparts in 2007 and 2011 (even after controlling for factors including party, experience and funding supports). The findings indicate the existence of a so-called ‘sacrificial lamb’ candidate selection strategy in 2016, whereby women newcomers selected by Fine Gael and less so by Labour were run against experienced incumbents, inhibiting the electoral prospects of these women while simultaneously enabling the parties to meet their obligations under the gender quota law.

Local base and networks

In an Irish context, one of the most important determinants of political success is the strength of a candidate’s local base (Kavanagh 2007: 186). One of the most effective methods of establishing this is through local government service. Some 85 per cent of TDs in the Dáil elected in 2020 (the 33rd Dáil) were councillors at some stage of their political careers (Gallagher 2021: 192). This rises to 88 per cent of the newcomer TDs, though with gender differences. Some 94 per cent of first-time men had local government experience compared with 75 per cent of first-time women TDs. As we have seen, there are relatively few women in local government. One way of

overcoming this disadvantage is through the development of local networks based on occupation. Professions such as teaching, medicine, law and business are generally seen as conferring status within a local community. They involve extensive interaction with the local electorate and can be used as a foundation for personal *bailiwick*-building. In addition, these occupations bring economic independence and relative flexibility of time, two additional advantages for a person ambitious to hold political office. It is no accident then that teaching is one of the more prevalent occupations among women TDs in the 33rd Dáil. Just over one-fifth (22 per cent, $n = 8$) of women TDs were teachers, an occupation that provides aspirants with significant local networking opportunities and the time in which to consolidate these networks. However, women TDs' working lives are diverse, including other occupations with the potential to generate a high profile such as trade union organisers, lawyers and businesswomen. These forms of employment combine three important factors facilitating political career-building: income security and financial independence, opportunities for local contact and time in which to pursue support-building activities. In terms of ethnicity, all women elected in 2022 were of Irish background. In this context, the absence of migrant and minority ethnic women from the Dáil is a striking feature of political under-representation in Irish democratic politics (Cullen and Gough 2022). So, too, is the under-representation of women and men of working-class backgrounds, even though there is evidence of a clearer social base of party support from 2011 onwards (see Chapter 6 and Madden 2018; Müller and Regan 2021).

Parliamentary representation of women's interests

The term 'representation' when used in the context of women's presence in parliamentary assemblies is taken to have two different, yet related, meanings. One is descriptive representation, which examines the numerical and social representativeness of the legislature (see discussion above). The second is substantive representation and includes questions such as: do women represent women's concerns; are they expected to do so by the voting public and do they feel they have a specific responsibility to speak for women's interests? In this section we focus on these questions.

Substantive representation – representing women's interests

Studies of women parliamentarians appear to indicate that women legislators seek in some way to speak and act for women in the community, and they also show that there is some expectation among women voters that women politicians will share their concerns (Celis 2014: 59–61). Indeed, many of the discriminatory policies enacted against women in Ireland from 1922 onwards are often seen as the product of a male-dominated political order. During the 1970s, when women's parliamentary representation was almost negligible, the articulation and representation of women's rights fell to the emerging feminist movement, a reform-minded judiciary (see Chapter 3) and the European Commission (see Chapter 14). These agencies were more important catalysts in the initiation of change in the status of women than either politicians or parliament. When it came to contested issues such as abortion, change was instigated by extra-parliamentary actors – civil society and international legal and political institutions (see Chapter 7, and Kennelly and Ward 1993; Bacik 2015).

Nonetheless, women in the Oireachtas also pressed for change in reproductive rights, and latterly, abortion. Parliamentarians such as Clare Daly (Independents 4 Change) and Ruth Coppinger (People Before Profit/Solidarity) added their efforts to that of long-time campaigner Ivana Bacik (Labour) in seeking reform of the constitutional position on abortion through private members' bills. In April 2017 the Citizens' Assembly convened to consider the issue and recommended that 'Article 40.3.3 be replaced with a Constitutional provision explicitly authorising the Oireachtas (Irish parliament) to address termination of pregnancy, any rights of the unborn and any rights of the pregnant woman'. The Assembly's report entered the parliamentary process and, after consideration by a specialised Oireachtas committee, was debated in January 2018. This was followed by a government proposal that a referendum take place on the deletion of Article 40.3.3 and its replacement by the simple declaration 'Provision may be made by law for the regulation of termination of pregnancy'. Following a poll on 25 May 2018, the result was 66 per cent support for repeal. On 13 December 2018, the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, enacting the referendum result, passed through parliament with significant majorities in both the Dáil and Seanad (Galligan 2021: 62–4).

The institutionalisation of women's interests

Gradually, as issues of women's rights and status in society came onto the political agenda in Ireland, political structures evolved and institutionalised the expression of these demands. Since 1993, there has been a cabinet minister for equality, with this brief constituting part of a larger portfolio. This remit, generally held by the Justice ministry, in 2020 moved to the newly created Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Commitments to gender mainstreaming policy and law have brought about an increase in legislative provision for gender equality issues. The Gender Recognition Act and the Marriage Act (legalising same-sex marriage) were passed in 2015. Provisions for redress of historical discriminations against women were made in the Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions (Amendment) Act, 2019 and the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another Matter Act, 2020. Reconciliation of work and family life, along with other gender equality issues in the workplace, also found a place on the statute books in recent years. Reform of family law, domestic violence law and provision for redress in cases of faults in diagnosis of cervical cancer were also enacted (see Table 9.1). Thus, there has been a notable volume of legislative proposals and debates addressing women's rights in recent years.

However, structures for supporting gender mainstreaming in policy did not emerge from the austerity years unscathed. Public sector bodies were targeted for savings after the fiscal crisis. Over 2009–10, the budget of the Equality Authority was cut by 43 per cent, and that of the Human Rights Commission by a quarter. The Equality Authority was merged with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHRC) in 2013, with a consequent reduction in expertise and personnel. Also closed in 2009 were the Women's Health Council and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency (merged with the Health Service Executive). Though there has been some restoration of funding for equality agencies and women's organisations, the depth of the row-back on equality institutions during the economic crisis reflects the contingent hold of the field in Irish governance.

The closure of the gender equality unit of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform predated the financial crisis. Its activities were ‘mainstreamed’ into the general working of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in 2006. The National Employment Action Plan (NEAP), too, had a gender mainstreaming requirement, as a result of European policy on equal opportunities for women and men in employment. However, this initiative also came to an end in 2006. Public funding for the peak women’s civil society organisation, the National Women’s Council of Ireland, was repeatedly cut. Since 1997, a restructuring of parliamentary committees led to the stand-alone women’s affairs committee being subsumed into the committee on justice and equality and, within that, the creation of a sub-committee on women’s rights in 1998. The separate standing of women’s rights has never been restored, making it more challenging for gender issues to be explored in a parliamentary context, as happens, for example, in Finland (Hoppania and Holli 2015). However, in recent years, two parliamentary initiatives have shone a spotlight on gender and politics. In January 2017, the Irish Women’s Parliamentary Caucus was established.¹² This initiative followed hot on the heels of a similar move in the Northern Ireland Assembly and reflects a growing trend in specialised parliamentary bodies dealing with gender equality matters (Sawer and Grace 2016). A special Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality was established in December 2021 to consider the recommendations contained in the Report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality. In December 2022 this committee published a report, setting out a blueprint for achieving a gender-equal Ireland¹³.

Conclusion

The relationship between women and politics in Ireland has changed over time. Women considering a career in public life continue to do so in a cultural environment that expects them also to fulfil traditional home-based duties. In partial response to these pressures, women are postponing having their first child until later in life (31.7 years of age in 2022) (CSO 2022b). The fertility rate, at 1.8 in 2021 (Eurostat 2023), is now below the population replacement level of 2.1. While Ireland still ranks low on the European scale in terms of women’s representation in political life, the legislative gender quota has begun to take effect. Thus, unlike earlier assessments that were pessimistic about an increased presence of women in elected office, the affirmative action measure is expected to continue improving women’s political presence. However, the gender quota measure should be seen as the start, rather than the culmination, of efforts to support women’s candidacy and election. Resistance to gender quotas remains within political parties and increasing cases of gendered and sexist abuse of women public representatives has seen increasing calls to support women’s candidacy and election, through an extension of legislative gender quotas to all elections, selection of party women to seats where there is a reasonable chance of electoral success, and legislative action on online abuse.

A range of issues raised by women since the 1970s, particularly those relating to women’s rights within the family and in employment, have largely been addressed. A number of institutional reforms have taken place that have impacted on gender equality issues. Alongside the courts, the internationalisation of Ireland’s gender equality agenda has led to important shifts in policy focus, bringing renewed opportunities for coalition building between external equality organisations and internal civil society activists, to effect change. Furthermore, women continue to forge ahead in

all aspects of Irish economic and social life. A new generation of women is taking its place in Irish decision-making fora. Considerable numbers of highly educated, experienced, talented women are not prepared to settle for a second-place role in Irish society. The effect of these patterns combined is to influence politics and political parties to be more responsive to, and inclusive of, women and women's issues. The challenge for the future is to maintain, and improve, gender equality in all its aspects, while taking account of the intersectional complexities of gender-related issues. On this point, parties and politics have a long road to travel.

Figure 9.1 Proportion of women and men within civil service grades, 2018

Photo/Image Female politicians past and present, 2018

Throughout 2018, the Oireachtas celebrated 100 years of votes for women (Vótáil 100) and women gaining the right to stand in parliamentary elections. As part of a year-long programme of events, all living former women TDs and Senators were invited back to Leinster House to meet with current women serving in the Oireachtas, and this photograph, taken in the Dáil chamber, recorded the event.

Source: Courtesy of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Figure 9.2 Proportion of women in politics at the national level, 1977–2020

Source: Authors' own calculations.

Note: Ministerial officeholding includes cabinet ministers and ministers of state on the announcement of a new government (does not include subsequent changes).

Table 9.1 Legislation on gender issues, 2018–21

Title	Number
Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018	No. 31 of 2018
Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) (Amendment) Act 2019	No. 4 of 2019
Thirty-sixth Amendment of the Constitution Act 2018	No. C36 of 2018
Domestic Violence Act 2018	No. 6 of 2018
Family Law Act 2019	No. 37 of 2019
Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019	No. 35 of 2019
Cervical Check Tribunal Act 2019	No. 31 of 2019
Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions (Amendment) Act 2019	No. 26 of 2019
Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021	No. 20 of 2021
Parental Leave (Amendment) Act 2019	No. 11 of 2019
Thirty-eighth Amendment of the Constitution (Dissolution of Marriage) Act 2019	No. C38 of 2019
Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another Matter, Act 2020	No. 20 of 2020
CervicalCheck Tribunal (Amendment) Act 2021	No. 22 of 2021
Family Leave and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2021	No. 4 of 2021

Table 9.2 Women councillors elected at local elections, 1974–2019

Election year	Women's seat holding (%)
1974	6

1979	6
1985	8
1991	12
1999	15
2004	19
2009	17
2014	21
2019	24

Source: Buckley and Hofman (2015: 89); Manning (1987: 158–60).

Table 9.3 Proportion of women in party national executive or equivalent body, 2020/22

Party	% women
Green Party	60
Labour	52
Sinn Féin	42
Social Democrats	40
The Right To Change	33
Fianna Fáil	29
Fine Gael	25

Source: Data for Sinn Féin was sourced from its 2020 financial statements (Sinn Féin 2021), submitted to the Standards in Public Office Commission in 2021. Data for all other parties was sourced from the political parties directly, through email exchanges, between May and September 2022.

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Provides data on women in Ireland and is maintained by the Gender Equality Division of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

<http://www.unwomen.org/en>

UN Women is an entity of the United Nations, responsible for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

<http://www.womenforelection.ie/>

Women for Election Datahub

Hosted by Women for Election, a non-partisan organisation that encourages women to run for politics and provides capacity training to achieve this aim. This site also contains data and research on women in Irish politics, including the DataHub, which maps women’s political representation in Ireland.

<http://www.nwci.ie/>

National Women’s Council – a representative group of women and women’s groups in Ireland.

<https://www.seeherelected.ie/>

See Her Elected (SHE) – a non-partisan organisation supporting women in rural Ireland to run for politics and be politically involved.

<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/visit-and-learn/centenaries/votail-100/>

Vótáil100 – a datahub maintained by the Oireachtas, commemorating the extension of voting rights to women in 1918.

<https://www.mna100.ie/centenary-moments/women-in-cabinet-mna-sa-chomh-aireachta/>

Mná100 – an online resource, developed as part of the Decade of Commemorations to commemorate those women who have served in cabinet.

1 On 8 March 2023, International Women's Day, the government announced its intention to hold a referendum on Article 41.2 in November 2023. For more information, please see <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/534bb-taoiseach-and-minister-ogorman-announce-holding-of-referendum-on-gender-equality/> (accessed 19 April 2023).

2 ‘The employment rate is the number of employed aged 15 to 64 expressed as a percentage of the total population aged 15 to 64’ (CSO 2022).

3 See <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/aa331-minister-ogorman-announces-introduction-of-gender-pay-gap-reporting-in-2022/> (accessed 1 July 2022).

4 See <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/previous-assemblies/2020-2021-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf> (accessed 1 July 2022).

5 The Representation of the People Act, 1918 granted the vote to women aged 30 and over who met certain property qualifications, while all men aged 21 and over were entitled to vote. Women and men in Ireland gained equal suffrage rights under Article 14 of the Constitution of the Irish Free State, 1922. This came into effect at the 1923 general election.

6 An alliance of groups and individuals called for the introduction of gender quotas including the 5050 Group, the National Women’s Council of Ireland, the women’s section of the Labour Party, the non-partisan group, Women for Election and academics researching in the area of women in politics.

7 A sub-committee of the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women’s Rights namely ‘Women’s Participation in Politics’ was convened in April 2009. In September 2009, the Joint Committee on the Constitution conducted a review of the electoral system to assess its performance against a range of criteria, including the representation of women.

8 See <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40219310.html> for more information about COVID Women’s Voices (accessed 1 July 2022).

9 For more on this act, see <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2021/si/89/made/en/print> (accessed 1 July 2022).

10 The nine registered parties were Aontú, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Green Party, Labour Party, People Before Profit/Solidarity, Sinn Féin, Social Democrats and The Right To Change.

11 Under the Electoral Act, 1997 political parties must detail their expenditure under a number of headings including ‘participation by women’.

12 For more information about the Women’s Caucus, see www.oireachtas.ie/en/members/womens-caucus/.

13 For more on this report, please see Unfinished Democracy: Achieving Gender Equality, available at

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_gender_equality/reports/2022/2022-12-15_final-report-on-unfinished-democracy-achieving-gender-equality_en.pdf (accessed 19 April 2023).