



Comhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo
Mayo County Council



WOMEN IN POLITICS AND COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION

A study of the experiences of women
at local and national level within the
County of Mayo, Ireland.

Report produced by
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This research was commissioned and funded by the Community & Integrated Development Section, Mayo County Council.

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“ The fastest way to change society is to mobilise the women of the world ”

Charles Malik, Lebanese representative to the United Nations; President of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights responsible for the drafting and adoption of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Malik, 2001).



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Forward

Introduction from CLLR. Richard Finn Cathaoirleach, Mayo County Council

I am delighted to introduce this study into the experiences of women engaging in the political and community representation system at local and national level in Co Mayo.

This study is the result of a lot of effort and hard work by a lot of people. I wish to acknowledge and recognise the efforts of our own Mayo County Council staff, members of the local development companies South West Mayo & Mayo North East, and the researchers Dr. Janine McGinn and Dr. Mary O' Connor.

I wish also to acknowledge and thank the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Authorities for providing the funding to make this study possible.

However, I wish to give a special thanks and acknowledgement to the women who participated in the study. I wish to express our deep gratitude to these women for giving of their time and for sharing their insights and experiences. It is by listening and hearing the experiences and stories of these participants that we can learn and gain an understanding of the barriers that exist to the equal participation of women in our political system.

I hope this study will act as a catalyst to encourage further action and create a political system which enjoys the benefits of an equal gender balance.

Preface

I wish to thank all of those involved in creating this valuable study into the experiences of women engaging in the political and community representation system.

Commissioned by Mayo County Council with the support provided by the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Authorities, this study travels alongside the women of Mayo reflecting their experiences at every stage of the journey. This study documents the women's hopes, fears and experiences.

This study worked with eight representatives' groups from across the economic, cultural and geographical spectrum of our County. The study examines the barriers to female political representation and we hear the voices of Migrant, Traveller, and business communities throughout the study.

It is timely to reflect that it is 30 years ago, this month that Mayo's own Mary Robinson made history by becoming Ireland's first female president. This historic achievement was one step in a journey towards a more equitable society for our country. This study is another step along that journey. I wish to thank and acknowledge the people who gave their time and effort to make this study a reality.

Peter Duggan

Chief Executive (acting) of Mayo County Council.

This study focuses on capturing the voices of one half of our society – women. The researchers engaged with women from very diverse backgrounds to record their experiences of political and community representation systems. One of the objectives of the study was to raise awareness among women in Mayo in relation to getting involved in community and political representation processes.

The political system is an essential pillar of our society. If citizens want to engage meaningfully within society it is important to engage with the political system. If specific cohorts of the population are not engaging with this central pillar it can result in citizens feeling disengaged from society. This in turn, can lead to a lack of social cohesion and a sense of a 'them and us' within society. This can result in a dangerous situation for our society, and potentially have a destabilising effect on our democratic system.

This study not only examines women's experiences in Co. Mayo, in community and political representation systems, but it hopes to reach out beyond these experiences, and encourage conversations about valuing and celebrating difference. The document conveys the message that the scourge of discrimination in all its forms, is a serious challenge for everyone in our county and society. In order to address this challenge and celebrate difference, we take inspiration from the words of the late John Hume, when he said "Difference is the essence of humanity. Difference enriches humanity and "by spilling our sweat not our blood we can build together and break down the barriers of centuries"(Hume, 1996).

The researchers employed an emancipatory research methodology, an approach which values difference. Emancipatory research is a critical theory-based research method. One of the key assumptions in emancipatory research is that there are multiple realities, and that research findings are not generated by a researcher who might be perceived to be dominant or elitist, but instead, research findings are generated by equal participation and interaction by researcher and participant. Emancipatory research is designed for social innovation, where the researcher interacts with the people who may be marginalised for reasons of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or economic background. In this research model, the process itself is designed to be a powerful awareness raising and emancipatory tool. Those who carry the burden of inequality, in this case women in the political and community representation system, often have a more refined and precise understanding of how inequality operates, than those who enjoy the benefits of inequality. Experience has shown us that it is vital to link the researchers with those experiencing inequality if the research is to be part of a capacity building process for social change. The linkages were facilitated by a group of dedicated people in the background.

This document would never have seen the light of day if it were not for the dedication, commitment and talent of many people.

I wish to acknowledge the funding and support provided by the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Authorities who provided funding for this research and related activities.

I wish to thank my fellow working group members who guided the development of this project from the start. The working group consisted of Celesta Khosa; Anne Ronayne (from Mayo County Council); Anne Finn and Maria McHale (from Local Development Companies: Mayo North East & South West Mayo).

I also wish to thank the researchers and authors of this report Dr Janine McGinn and Dr Mary O' Connor. Their level of work and dedication went far beyond all agreements and commitments made. However, most crucially the respect and professionalism they showed to the participants was central to the success of this report, and this is something the working group wish to acknowledge and recognise.

Finally, I wish to thank the participants for their engagement in this process. The stories they shared and the giving so generously of their experiences has created a very human document providing enriching insights into the experiences of these women. For their engagement, professionalism, commitment and dedication we are very grateful.

So, I hope you enjoy this document, and that it serves to help create a Mayo that embraces the richness of our diversity. I think Mayo's own Mary Robinson sums up what we ultimately want to achieve eloquently in her acceptance speech as the first female president of Ireland when she said:

But as well as our emigrants abroad we have exiles at home; all those who are at home but homeless; the poor, the sick, the old, the unemployed, and above all, the women of Ireland who are still struggling on the long march to equality and equity. To all those who have no voice or whose voice is weak I say: take heart. There is hope. Look what you did in this election. You made history. As President, I hope we will make history together.

(Robinson, 1990)

Dóchas linn Naomh Padraig - agus treise libh mná na hÉireann - a bhuail buille, ní amháin bhur son féin, ach ar son ceart an duine! (Hope for St. Patrick - and the strength of the women of Ireland - who have struck a blow, not only for yourselves, but for human rights!).

Jim Power, Mayo County Council.



Executive summary

This executive summary summarises the major points which emerged in this study of the issues and challenges faced by females in, or aspiring to be in, leadership roles in politics or in community representation in Mayo. This study is situated within an era of significant cultural change in Ireland and it represents an important milestone in the study of female representation in political and community affairs in rural Ireland. Much research has been conducted into female representation in politics at a national level and separately, at community levels. Research has also been conducted within various ethnic communities where the challenges and barriers faced by women, when they attempt to gain leadership roles in community organisations and regional and national politics, have been documented extensively, but separately.

In contrast to previous studies, this review of the experiences of eight groups of female representatives has the distinction of examining issues and challenges to female political representation at the national level, while exploring concurrently, issues at the rural roots of the political journey, within community representation. This study attempts to shed light on the reasons behind the lower representation of females in the local and national political arena from the County of Mayo. It includes the voices of female national and county politicians and it also includes the voices of females from Sporting; Youth and Farming organisations in addition to the contributions of female representatives from the Migrant; Traveller; Public Sector and Business communities. It is situated in the context of the County of Mayo, a rural peripheral county in the West of Ireland.

Commissioned by Mayo County Council (MCC), no previous study has travelled alongside the women of Mayo documenting their perceptions and experiences at every stage of the journey from deeply rooted rural and cultural communities to the houses of the Oireachtas (Houses of the Irish Parliament). This study not only documents these women's experiences; fears and aspirations but it tells their tales and lends equal weight to their voices. Findings from the discussions with participants are illustrated with representative quotes and presented in Chapters Three and Four. Conclusions support the initial hypothesis which suggested that women experience barriers when engaging in the political system at community level and beyond. A series of comprehensive recommendations are provided, which, if implemented, may further enable and inspire women from different communities and origins to achieve their leadership aspirations, at local, community, county and national political representation level in Ireland, and beyond.

County Mayo has a population of 130,507 people (CSO, 2017). There are four municipal districts in the county with a total of 30 county council seats. In the 2019 local elections there were 28 men and 2 women elected to the council, despite an increase in the number of female nominees when comparisons were made to previous local elections.

The fact that just two women were elected to the council with 30 available seats contributed to the decision to commission this research, to identify potential challenges experienced by women when engaging in the political system in Mayo. The research project originated within the Community & Integrated Development Section at Mayo County Council, where a research project working group (WG) was established. This WG recommended that an emancipatory research approach be employed to engage with women from eight different groups spread across the county.

Approach

The researchers employed an emancipatory research paradigm as recommended by the WG. Emancipatory principles suggest that research related to disadvantage and equality is conducted with the people directly affected (Danieli and Woodhams, 2007). In line with those principles, a qualitative interpretive paradigm was used to serve the multiple realities associated with the emancipatory framework (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

The research objectives were agreed, and the following research questions guided the study:

1. What were the motivators for women to become involved in community affairs and /or political affairs in Mayo?
2. What were the experiences of the women in the course of their involvement?
3. What, if any, recommendations would the women make to improve participation for women in Mayo?

A purposive sampling strategy was used to gather the data in line with the criteria agreed with the WG. Participants were women involved in specific groupings in the community or within the political system in Mayo. Participants were recruited by both the WG and the researchers. Focus group discussions were facilitated and where this was

not possible, semi-structured interviews were carried out via telephone or other virtual technologies. All groups were asked the same questions in the research process. Ethical considerations were considered at every stage of the research process. Dedoose software for data classification and analysis assisted with the data management process. During this process, the experiences and views of 35 female participants from eight different community and political groupings across County Mayo were captured.

Key findings

Findings from the research became evident at three different levels. There were recurring themes which arose in the conversations which affected the women, at the level of their own personal development (known in this study as elements which have impact on the individual), such as confidence and self-perception; childcare availability and education. Secondly, there were elements referenced which had impact at the level of the representative grouping, such as positive and negative gender bias. Thirdly, there were topics discussed which had impact at a wider societal or structural level, such as societal cultural and traditional issues. The specific challenges to political and/or community representation at each of these levels are outlined and direct quotations from the women are provided. These quotations are representative of the views of the relevant group of female participants.

Confidence; gender-related bias; the influence of tradition and culture on the roles and positioning of women and the value of education were the salient issues frequently referenced across all groups, though there were further important group-specific issues. Research findings are reported in two chapters. The findings from conversations with the political representatives are reported separately to the findings from conversations with the other seven groups.

The reasoning behind this separation of findings into two chapters is twofold. One reason is that some of the themes that held huge importance for the political representatives held little or no significance for the other group and the second reason is that the participants in the political grouping had experience of involvement as *elected* representatives and that experience brought several distinctive themes into the discussions, which were not comparable to those in the other seven groupings.

Starting at the beginning of the political and community representation journey, findings from the local and county level groups are presented first, and then the voices of the political representatives are documented. As outlined earlier, the themes which research participants referenced will be presented under three headings: Elements which have impact on the individual female; Elements which have impact on the representative group and Elements which have impact at the societal and cultural level. The sequence in which findings are presented reflect the typical progression of the female public representative on her journey from rural community affairs to national politics, and illustrate the challenges faced as an individual right up to the challenges faced at representative group or community level and then at a broader cultural or societal level.

Representing the voices of participants involved in community and local organisational affairs

This section deals with research findings from participants in seven out of the eight groups researched. Here, participants' voices represent: Sporting clubs; the Youth; Farmers' organisations; the Business community; Public sector workers and the Traveller and Migrant communities in County Mayo.

Elements having impact on the Individual

When the participants were asked what motivated them to become involved in the different clubs, committees and organisations, some had identified the need to advocate for a critical cause or for their community, which may not otherwise have been represented. Others wanted to voice their own view or views on behalf of their family, their community, their organisation or their club. Advocacy was provided, for example, for people with extra needs and for the housing or educational needs of their communities. The women also expressed a desire to be part of a wider support network and to meet others and to learn more about other communities. Other motivations included aspirations to establish specific services in their area.

One of the most significant factors referenced as having an impact on women's progression in community or public representation was the degree of shyness or humble self-perception, according to research participants, in addition to a lack of personal confidence in their own capabilities. Participants spoke about how women underestimate their own abilities and that their lower levels of confidence (in comparison to their male counterparts) impacted strongly

upon decisions to engage in community affairs and on progress towards a role as a community representative or organisational leader. In fact, the lack of confidence was identified as one of the principal reasons that prevents women from becoming involved. Participants suggested that a person's level of self-confidence impacts on the perception of their own competency or on other people's view of their competency to carry out a role effectively.

Confidence in the possibility of being elected as a public representative was low in the Traveller and the Migrant groups, though many were enthusiastic about getting involved, they believed that because they belonged to a minority group that they would not get the votes. Across the other seven community representative groups, when the participants were asked whether they would go forward as a nominee in local or national election, several participants stated that they had no interest, would not have "the guts", or would not know how to get involved. There was a general lack of knowledge and some confusion in relation to how to get involved in a political party and how to become a nominee for election. Some participants believed that it was a difficult process to get involved in, if you did not have a family member or relative involved in politics. This lack of knowledge was highlighted as a barrier to accessing political roles.

Further to the desire for knowledge, having a formal education was also identified as a significant factor which would have impact on an individual's ability or choice to get involved in community affairs. However, when education was discussed across the different groups, it held significant value for some and less for others. For the Youth group, the Public sector group and the Business group, a certain level of education was taken for granted, yet for others, education was seen as the way forward for their community. Barriers accessing education were significant for the Migrant group, mainly because of language related deficits; a lack of transport; the distance involved to a course of their choice and the significant financial cost involved.

An additional factor highlighted by these groups was the impact of the duties of caring for the family and for children. This was referenced by some of the women in these groupings as an impediment to their becoming involved in community affairs.

Elements which have impact at representative group level

Gender bias was a recurring principal theme discussed by all groups involved in various community groups and local organisations in Mayo, inviting much participant engagement. Gender biases led to appointments to particular roles according to the experiences of some participants, in order to "tick the box" for gender balance. However, these women did not welcome the perception of their accession to a role "just because they were a woman" and were committed to appointments being made based on merit or the "best fit" for the post.

Several participants outlined their experiences of gender bias directed against them and gave many examples to back up their experiences, most notably when going forward for leadership roles in business and public sector organisations and clubs. Examples were given of attempts being made to encourage women to apply for supporting roles rather than leadership roles, even though the women were more qualified. Networking and canvassing for leadership roles took place outside the structure of the organisations, clubs or committees and participants suggested that this favoured men more than women.

Some participants suggested that the anticipation of potential gender bias was enough to prevent some women from becoming involved in the first place. "Derogatory remarks flying around the table" was cited as a reason for another participant to leave a specific organisation. However, it is important to note, that this perception of appointment-related bias was not widespread as other participants experienced no gender-based discrimination in their involvement in community affairs for many years.

Gender bias was particularly evident in minority communities, according to participants from those groups interviewed. They felt that within these minority communities, their male counterparts were listened to more than women were, at general meetings. Gender-biased commentaries caused discomfort and self-doubt, with one participant questioning her own perceptions and incorrectly attributing discriminatory sexist comments to her lack of "understanding of the Irish sense of humour".

It is interesting to note that, while many participants in these groups exercised their concern about balanced gender representation in their organisations and communities, the minority groups were still facing the challenge of gender-unrelated representation for their community in general.

Elements which have impact at a wider societal or structural level

The traditional view of the role of the woman still prevails in wider society and local community, according to research participants. According to Youth group participants, “older people believed there was a particular role for women in society”, though their Youth group peers, they believed, had more progressive views. In the main, women take primary responsibility for childrearing and do the majority of the housework, while also working outside the home in many instances. Migrant community participants were insulted (when provided with limited educational or occupational opportunities) by the assumption that only female-stereotypical job opportunities would be suited to them. The only available educational and career opportunities provided to their community by officials, were roles in the caring professions, which many of them were not interested in.

However, a popular view within the groupings was that the women themselves, held themselves back as they did not perceive themselves as being able to compete with men. Paradoxically, though in some minority communities, men were perceived as being the boss of the household, participants stated that it was the women in those communities who took on the role of leaders in the household and who took the initiative to access support services and become a “voice for their community”.

Overt racism was also cited as a barrier to involvement in community representation by some interviewees in the Migrant community. It is cited as a major concern to the Traveller community and participants believed that the problem was escalating.

Though there were many examples provided of societal stereotyping and pressure to remain within the boundaries of traditional female roles, the predominant perception among participants is that cultural change is occurring, though perhaps at a glacial rate.

Findings from the Political representatives

This section deals with research findings from participants in the group of Female politicians interviewed. Findings are reported separately to the other groups for the reasons outlined above. Quotations selected are representative of the grouping. Much greater detail and further thought-provoking stories on the issues which emerged are presented in Chapter Four of this study.

Elements having impact on the Individual

The principal motivators which the politicians stated for getting involved in political representation included: having “their voice represented”; representing causes and issues for their community and having the ability to make a difference by pursuing the causes they believed in, and influencing decision making at government level. The substantial commitment required within a public political position was an issue which emerged most strongly as having a major impact on the political representatives’ motivations towards the choice of a career in politics or towards leadership in community representation. The long hours and public expectations of around-the-clock availability are challenges which these participants claim adversely affect their work-life balance and their career choice. Several of these work-related challenges are gender-neutral, affecting all political representatives, regardless of gender.

In relation to confidence and self-perception, while the political representatives had confidence in their own abilities, many frequently highlighted an underlying confidence deficit or reserve, a tendency which, they claim, inhibits the female political aspirant. The message from the experienced female politicians to aspiring female politicians is to “fake it ‘til you make it” and have the courage to put yourself out there, as “good enough is good enough”.

Having a formal education, according to the participants, is an asset but not a prerequisite to accessing a career in politics. However, many participants underlined the importance of having the practical knowledge, insights and know-how required to “get on the ticket” and become a representative, in addition to the essential negotiation and communications skill set required to become a political representative. These insights are often provided by having a family member or relative involved in politics. However, by becoming a member of one of the principal political parties, it was noted that you gain beneficial training, knowledge and insights.

In relation to childcare, the majority of female political representatives did not have children when they were elected. Yet, according to one of the politicians, most of her male counterparts did have children. Maternity leave is not an option for female politicians, according to two of the participants, as their constituents elected them, putting their trust in them as individuals and, likening their position to an entrepreneur who needed to keep the business open, they believed that they would not get re-elected if they were away from their post for a prolonged period.

Elements which have impact at representative group level

Gender issues were referred to by the female political representatives as impacting on all levels of representation. Some spoke about the support from their male colleagues in the political chambers but expressed the view that speaking out could leave them feeling vulnerable as they were in a male dominated environment. There is no gender quota for local elections and therefore there are consistently low numbers of females in local representation. One participant represented the unanimous view that “it’s difficult for women to emerge” in such a male dominated environment, even though the female politician may be perfectly capable or even more capable than her male counterparts. However, reference was also made to the positive benefits of being the only female nominee and how “it was more of a help than a hindrance” to some of the politicians.

Becoming known to the community and developing trust with constituents is an important precursor to getting nominated as a candidate for election. The politicians who were interviewed had, in the main, spent many years involved at community level before being elected to county or national level politics.

Elements which have impact at a wider societal or structural level

There is still a prevailing societal cultural bias which works against aspiring female leaders. Stories are told about encounters with enduring perceptions of female stereotypical roles in Irish society. These cultural and traditional views have an adverse impact on the aspirations of female political representatives. The evidence is provided in the findings by stories from the politicians on the campaign trail. The existence of these biases is also acknowledged within community organisations, where the female at the top table is typically allocated the secretarial duties, and the chairperson is male.

There are still strongly held beliefs in the community in relation to the traditional place and role of women in the home. Working as a national political representative was perceived to be “unnatural” for a woman, and retorts like “aren’t you so lucky you have a husband that will mind the children” reflect this traditional perspective. Women in a particular age category are believed to be “more comfortable with a male” as their political representative.

Most of the female politicians had experienced hostile commentaries related to their appearance in the press and social media and their personal lives had been publicly dissected. They believed that they were subjected to more judgement and a “higher moral compass” than their male counterparts. Females were exceptionally hard on female politicians in this regard.

Political lifestyle and career challenges

A significant part of the discussions related to the challenges of the political career. Many examples were provided of the adverse impact of onerous political career commitments on the personal lives of the politicians. A major challenge for politicians elected to the County Council is that they rarely have time off, as they have to juggle a full-time occupation with this demanding part-time position. A feature of their commitments are the many late evening meetings. For these reasons, as one national politician put it, “it’s a catastrophic career for family”.

You need to have a strong determined character to face the challenges and survive in politics. The nomination process presents difficulties and in some cases is orchestrated to promote or block a particular candidate, you have to be “cut out for it”.

Other challenges to political engagement include the lengthy geographical distance from Mayo to the Dáil in Dublin for weekly commitments and participants emphasised the significant financial costs involved in funding an election campaign. These challenges equally impact on male and female politicians.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has answered the three research questions posed at the outset: The female participants have clearly: (1) identified their motivations for getting involved in community and political representation; (2) provided extensive detail on their experiences of involvement in political and/or community affairs as a representative; and (3) provided suggestions to address challenges and barriers they may have encountered on their journey to represent their communities.

The final chapter in this report, Chapter Five, presents the findings which have emerged across all eight participant groupings and attempts to draw out the conclusions, in addition to drawing comparisons to some previous related studies. Recommendations voiced by the participants to address the issues they have raised are presented in this final chapter. Recommendations are presented at the three levels of impact on female political and community representation: at the level of the Individual; at the level of the representative group; and at the wider societal and structural level.

Recommendations to address challenges which have impact at the individual level

Recommendations to build self-confidence

1. It is recommended that girls from a young age, be exposed to politics and community representation via engagement with political role models and mentors; open engagement with the election process and the party system; and political orientation visits to government buildings.
2. The continued support and development of youth organisations which provide youth leadership programmes and provide opportunities to debate and listen to and voice views at national youth forums is critical to building the confidence of young female representatives.
3. To build confidence, it is important to highlight the achievements of female politicians and successful female role models, via an ongoing series of presentations or mini conferences in the county.
4. It is important to encourage female community group representatives to join empowering female network groups such as “Network Mayo” and “going for growth”, to build networks and develop personal confidence levels.

Recommendations to bridge educational gaps

1. Continued provision for the essential and basic needs of language support, childcare support and training initiatives for Migrant groups is recommended, to bridge the educational gap between these groups and mainstream society and provide these groups with the necessary attributes for political and community representation.
2. The provision of access (for all society groups) to educational programmes of their choosing is critical.
3. The value of informal educational initiatives should not be underestimated. The provision of targeted training in topics such as voting processes is invaluable, in particular for new entrants to the country.
4. A series of high-level coaching initiatives, leveraging the extensive political expertise across the county, targeting aspiring female community and political representatives, may incentivise and enable potential political candidates.

Recommendations to address challenges which have impact at representative group level

Recommendations to enhance gender parity at community and political representation forums

1. It is recommended that Mayo County Council become a signatory of the *European Charter for Equality of Men and Women in Local Life* (CEMR,2006), to make a formal commitment to the principle of equality of men and women and to implement, within their territory, the commitments set out in the charter.
2. The implementation of strict codes of practice and sanctions in organisations is highly recommended, so that gender related comments and offensive and inappropriate remarks “be squashed out”.
3. It is recommended that, as a mark of best practice, the ‘top table’ of community organisations be rotated periodically, having regard to equality and diversity of representation.
4. It is recommended that rural political and community group organisations consider the schedules of their meetings to allow for family friendly meeting times. In addition, they should consider that the local councillor role is a part-time one, and that most councillors have a full-time position to discharge, in order to meet their personal financial obligations.
5. All available support and encouragement should be provided for female members of the Traveller and Migrant community groups, who express an interest in becoming involved in community affairs, and in the broader political system, as this research highlights that female members of those communities are faced with extra barriers, compared to the general population.

Recommendations to address challenges which have impact at a wider societal or structural level

Addressing the challenges of culture and tradition

1. Practical interaction with strong female leaders and role models should be encouraged with specific focuses. Women in leadership roles should be paired as mentors to actively bring other women along.
2. An ongoing series of documentaries or short stories should be redacted and publicised about notable achievements of Mayo women or women of the West of Ireland, to encourage and celebrate a kind of leadership that is more empathetic and more intuitively competent.
3. A series of interactive workshops should be held around the question of female leadership inside our different cultural communities (what a female leader looks like inside each community).
4. Promote gender equality from a young age, both at home and at school to have a healthier society and also enhance female political representation in the future.
5. Promote workshops where Traveller and Migrant communities and the broader population may share their respective traditions and cultures to increase trust, respect, understanding and acceptance of diversity and inclusivity. A recent video on the craft of paper flower making, created during Traveller Pride Week, is one example of what can be done (MTSG, 2020).

Recommendations to address the highlighted challenges of the political career

1. Consider the standardisation of meeting times and incorporation of the right to work/life balance for councillors and politicians. Educate the electorate to consider the timing of the demands they put on community and political representatives.
2. To address the cost of election campaigning for female candidates, it is suggested that a philanthropic fund be established.
3. To address the geographic distance to be travelled from Mayo to Dublin it is suggested that online technologies be facilitated for regular meetings and that meeting locations be rotated periodically to avoid repetitive long trips to Dublin.
4. The quota system should remain, and it is recommended that pressure be put on the Irish government to activate gender quotas at County Council level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many reasons why women become involved in community and political representation. Whatever the reasons for becoming involved, the majority of participants referenced the hard work and time it took to being involved.

Participants' enthusiasm for community and political representation comes from a desire to "make a difference" and this is what differentiates them from the power broking that sometimes takes place at higher levels, when candidates are vying for nomination and battling for a seat in a constituency. If women are provided with the means and the support and they feel they are going to be able to make a real difference to people, they will be encouraged to put themselves forward for a role.

To encourage more women to take the journey from community representation to political representation and get involved at higher levels in the community and in their organisations, they must feel they will make a real difference. One of the national political representatives urges the "wonderful women" working hard at community level to step up to national representation as, though they "work very hard at community level", they must "realise that it is at the higher levels that decisions are made".

Chapter 1 Introduction

This study represents an important milestone in the study of female representation in political and community affairs in rural Ireland. Much research has been conducted at a national political level and separately at community levels and within various ethnic communities in relation to the barriers which face women when they attempt to gain leadership roles in community organisations and regional and national politics. However, this comprehensive study of eight representative groups is an innovative study as it has examined barriers to female political representation at the higher, national level yet, it also drills right down to the grass-roots levels of community, sporting, youth and farming organisations and includes the voices of female representatives from the Migrant, Traveller and Business communities in the rural peripheral county of Mayo in the West of Ireland.

Commissioned by Mayo County Council, no previous study has travelled alongside the women of Mayo documenting their perceptions and experiences at every stage of the journey from the roots of the rural communities to the houses of the Oireachtas. This study documents these women's experiences, fears and aspirations, and tells some of their stories along their journey to national representation. A series of comprehensive recommendations are provided in the final chapter of the report, which, the researchers hope, will further enable and inspire women from every walk of life in Ireland to achieve their leadership aspirations, in community; county and national political representation and beyond.

The objectives of this emancipatory research project included the identification of any potential challenges or barriers which may have been experienced by women when engaging in the political system at local, community, county and national level in the county. The motivations for women to become involved in representation; the experiences of their involvement and the recommendations for any challenges which emerged, were the further issues to be investigated.

The following three research questions guided the study:

- What were the motivators for women to become involved in community affairs and/or political affairs in Mayo?
- What were the experiences of the women in the course of their involvement?
- What, if any, recommendations would the women make, to improve participation for women in Mayo?

The impetus for this study was provided by the low percentage of female political representatives at national level and particularly within Mayo County Council, relative to their male counterparts. In local and national government in Ireland, men outnumber women and have done so since the foundation of the state. At national level, just 22.5% of the total representation or 36 out of the 160 seats in the Dáil are held by females. The statistics are considerably lower in Mayo where, for example, just 6.67% (2) of the number of elected representatives sitting in Mayo County Council in 2019 are female. Figure 1 illustrates the low representation of female to male County Council representatives following the 2019 elections.

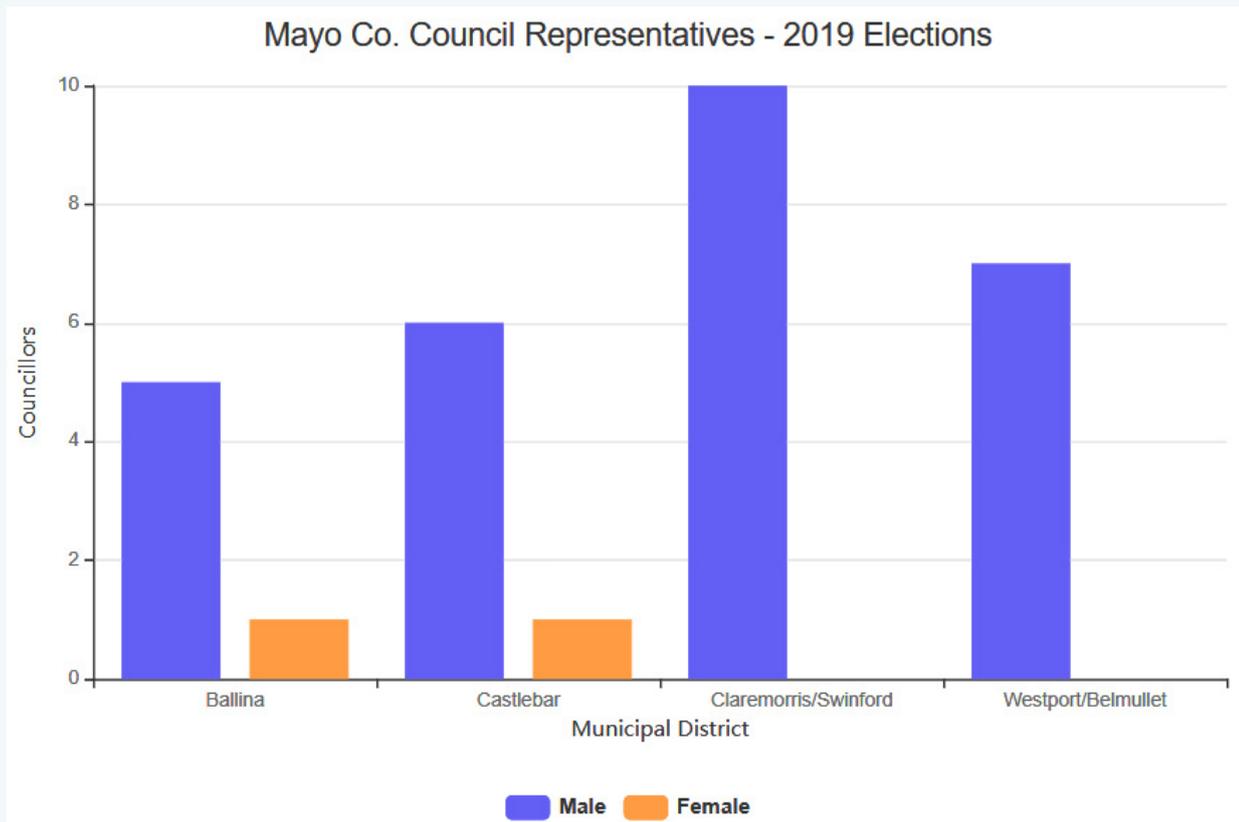


Figure 1 Mayo County Council representatives

The scope and design of the research project evolved following consultations between the researchers and the Mayo County Council Working Group (WG). The research focus was broadened to include community groups and representatives from diverse backgrounds in addition to political representatives.

Research context: County Mayo

County Mayo is the geographical context for the research. Eight representative groups across the county were chosen by the County Council Working Group who initiated this research project (WG). The prerequisites for participation in the research were established by agreement between the WG and the researchers. Research participants were to be female, County Mayo based and a member of the selected community and societal representative groups from:

1. The Business community;
2. The Public sector;
3. Sporting organisations;
4. The Traveller community;
5. The Migrant community;
6. The Farming community;
7. Youth organisations;
8. Political representatives.

The research project specification further stipulated that an emancipatory approach be taken by the researchers which in turn, facilitated respectful interactive engagement with the eight societal representative groupings selected. (For an explanation of the emancipatory approach, see the section in the Research Design Appendix, entitled *Philosophical underpinnings* in Appendix 1 and a further outline of the emancipatory research study in Appendix 2).

Employing an emancipatory approach, a qualitative methodology was employed to address the research questions. The sampling strategy and data collection instruments were agreed with the WG. Participants were selected in line with specifications and recruited by invitation from the working group or the researchers. The first option provided to participants was to join a focus group of peers within the same community and societal representative group. However, many participants opted to engage with researchers on a one to one, as some were not comfortable being interviewed as part of a focus group. Semi structured interviews were the medium used to prompt discussion.

As a result of the 2020 pandemic-related restrictions, options for data gathering were limited. Therefore, the researchers employed virtual technology using either ZOOM, TEAMS or telephone calls to conduct the interviews and focus groups and to generate and record the data. (See appendix 3 for the semi-structured questionnaire; information guidelines and consent form used). In total, 35 women engaged with the researchers. The interview scripts were transcribed and inserted into a qualitative data analysis software application and held securely.

Over 1000 units of meaning were coded from the scripts and then, the principal themes which emerged from the conversations were highlighted. These themes related to participants' experiences when engaging with political or community representation and the recommendations they presented to encourage and/or improve participation. These themes were highlighted and considered in terms of their emphasis and/or repeated occurrence in the data.

Significant themes emerging from this study

The four most significant recurring themes emerging across all groups are:

- Gender-related issues both positive and negative;
- Confidence and self-perception;
- The influence of tradition and culture on the roles and positioning of women;
- The value placed on education.

In addition to the factors identified above, the political representatives strongly emphasised the conditions and challenges associated with a political career. They believe that the conditions and challenges impact strongly on the decision to pursue high level involvement in community representation and/or a political career. Findings from the political representatives interviewed are represented separately in this report, as this group had perspectives which were in some respects, very different to all of the other seven representative groups. Figure 2 below shows the prominent themes which emerged across all groups except the group of political representatives.

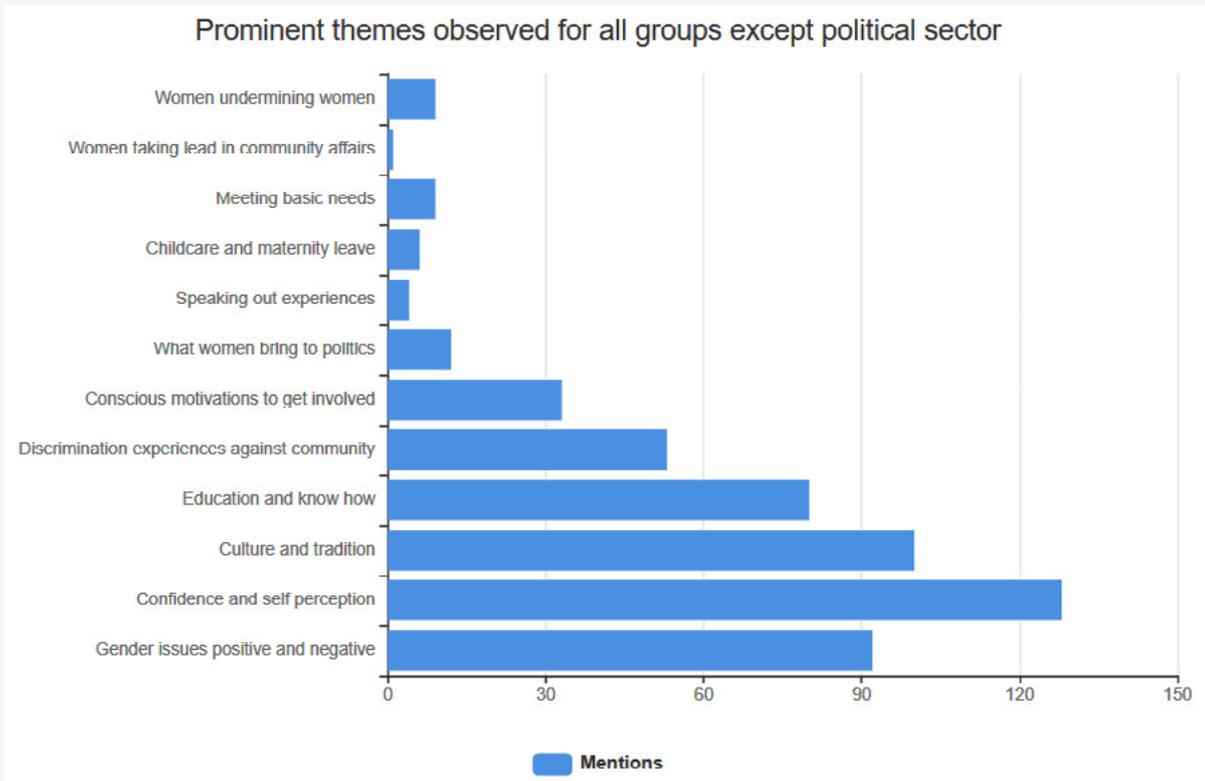


Figure 2 Principal themes which emerged across the 7 community representative groups

Excluding the political representatives, there were other, less marked differences when findings of the remaining seven groups were compared. For example, the incidence of references to negative gender discrimination was much higher in Traveller community and Migrant community discussions. In contrast, discriminatory themes were not as frequently referenced by participants in the Business and Politicians' groups. Chapters Three and Four of this report will present all of these findings in detail. Further detail of all of the emergent themes and the analytical process which was conducted is provided in Appendix 4.

The following chapter will set the scene by providing information relating to the research context and it will provide an overview of the studies which have already been conducted in the field.

Chapter 2 Context and related studies in the field

Background and context

In order to investigate barriers to women's representation in political and community representation in County Mayo and to make recommendations based on the findings, it is important to provide context to frame the discussions. This chapter compares statistics in female representation in politics across Europe and Ireland and references other reports and studies in the field, providing the background to the issue of female representation in leadership roles in politics and community representation.

Governments worldwide have fewer female than male representatives and the reasons provided are referenced as "discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women" (UNwomen.org, 2011). While some measures have been taken at an international level to address this, such as the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130 and EU equality directives (CEMR, 2018), the increase in women's public representation is happening very slowly and only in some countries. September 2020 witnessed the convening of the 75th Session of the UN Women General Assembly (UNwomen.org, 2020), albeit virtually, and as Covid-19 continues to affect people around the world "putting at risk the hard-won gains of women's rights, gender equality is on top of the agenda for decision-makers this year as they convene" (UNwomen.org, 2020). Some countries in Europe have made more gains than others in the numbers of women parliamentarians.

Female representation in European politics in local and regional government

Women are under-represented in decision-making and in leadership positions in many areas of life, but the situation in local and regional government in countries across Europe was described as being "especially dire" in 2018 by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR, 2019). However, the number of female elected representatives, at local, regional and national levels is slowly rising in many countries in the European Union. The figures after 2019, place Iceland at the top of the league with women making up 47% of the elected representatives in local councils, (see figure 3). France is ahead at regional level with 49% of women (CEMR, 2019) and Sweden has the highest level of female representation at national government level at 47% (Eurostat, 2019). Following the 2019 European elections 40% of the representatives to the European Parliament are now female.

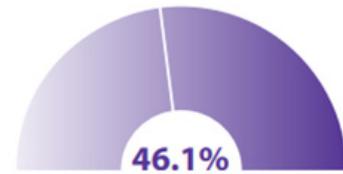
Female political representation at municipal and local councils is improving and now in Europe, seventeen countries have an average of between 30% to 40% in terms of female representation on municipal councils. Ten years ago, however, there were only seven countries with this level of representation.

¹ The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) is the broadest organisation of local and regional authorities in Europe. Its members come from over 60 national associations of municipalities and regions from 41 European countries.

Iceland

CEMR member

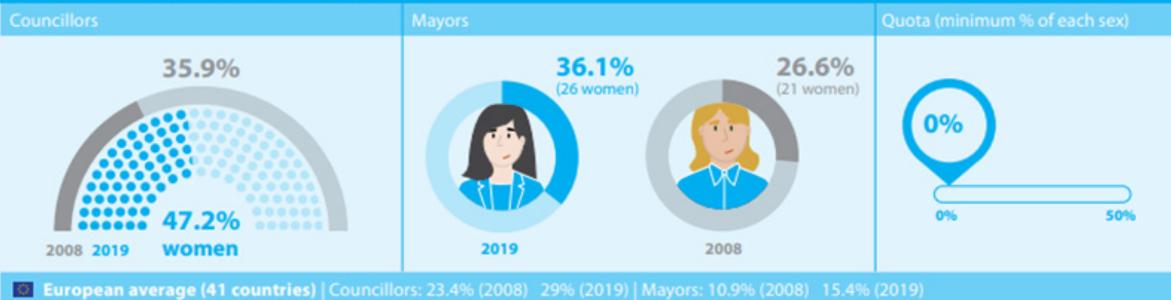
• Association of Local Authorities in Iceland (SAMBAND)



Proportion of women among all elected representatives

Sub-national level

Local level: 72 municipalities (sveitarfélag)



National level

	2019	2008
Unicameral/ Lower house	38.1%	36.5%

Figure 3 Female representation in Iceland at local level (Ceciarini, 2019)

How Ireland compares to European averages in local and regional government

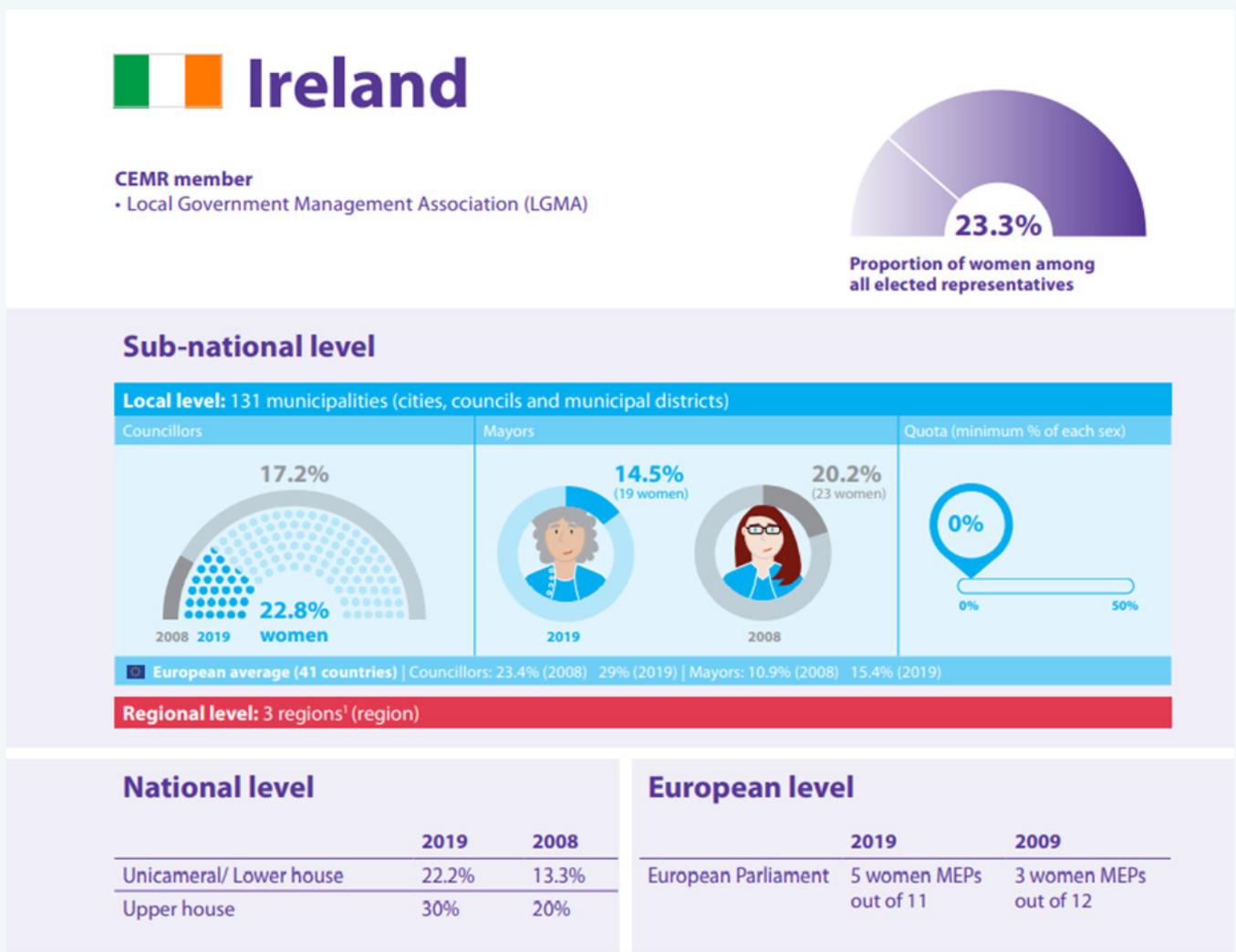


Figure 4 Female representation in Ireland at local level (Ceciarini, 2019)

We saw in Chapter 1 that female political representation in Ireland at national level equates to 22.5% of total representation, or 36 out of the 160 members of the current Dáil as of November 2020 (Lower House of Irish Parliament).

We saw also that in terms of local government, the statistic is considerably lower in Mayo (the context for this research) where, just 6.67% or two out of the thirty seats in the County Council (local government) are held by females. Female representation in Mayo at local level is extremely low when we compare it to the Irish national local representation average of 17.2% (Ceciarini, 2019). This national average, in turn, compares badly to the European average of 29% for female local political representation, see figure 5 (Ceciarini, 2019).

² Note that the CEMR statistics authored by Ceciarini in Figure 5, include this statistic for the lower house of government and may appear to slightly overstate the national representation figure of government ministers in the upper right quadrant of figure 4.

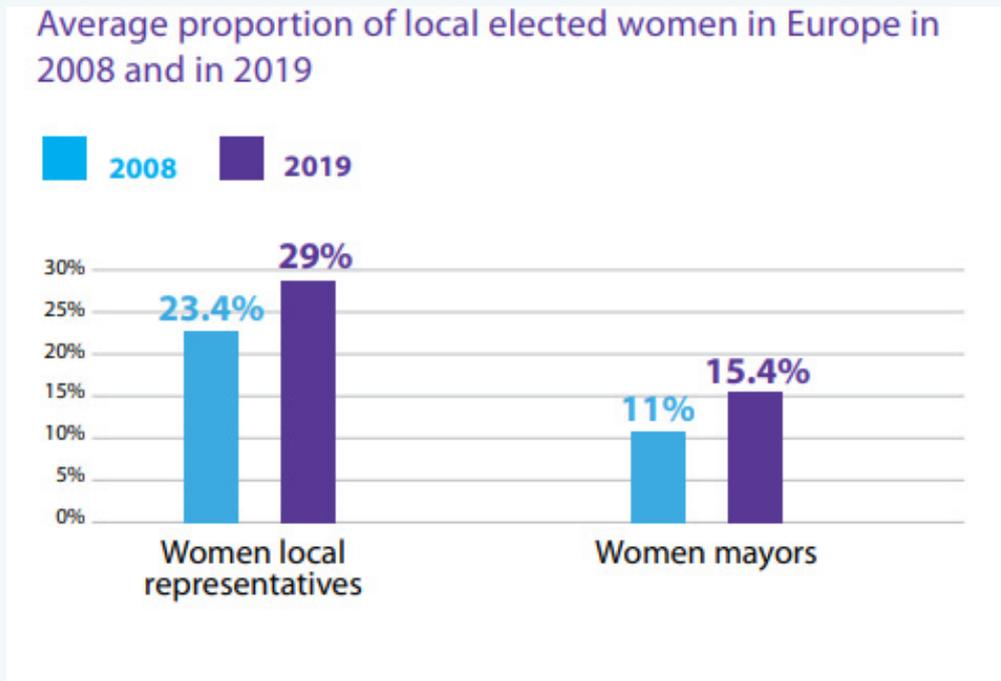


Figure 5 Average proportion of female local political representation in Europe (Ceciarini, 2019)

Progression of women as public representatives in Ireland

Since the foundation of the state, national politics in Ireland has been controlled, in the main, by male elected representatives. The current Dáil (Irish Parliament) has 160 Members who represent 39 constituencies. (Oireachtas, 2020). The general election in February 2020 resulted in 36 women, out of 159 members being elected as TDs (members of parliament), (the Speaker of the House is returned without election) to the lower house of the Oireachtas, representing 22.5 % of the total. This represented an increase of one additional seat since the 2016 elections, although the population in the state is relatively evenly split between males and females (O’Sullivan, 2020). The introduction of the gender quotas in 2016 caused the number of female candidates presenting for election to double from 2011 to 2016 (O Halloran, 2020) but in fact, the increase in the numbers of elected candidates has not been significant.

As outlined above, women are under-represented in local government in Ireland in comparison to European averages. Since 2004 there has been little change in the number of women elected to local councils across the country. One in five seats (20.2%) were taken by women in 2004 and there was a slight increase in 2019 with 23.9% of the seats going to women (CSO, 2020). The largest number of women elected in the 2019 local elections was in the Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown district, where 50% of the seats were taken by women up from 30.4% in 2004 (Gleeson, 2019).

We have seen that County Mayo compares poorly with the national averages of female local representation and currently has only two female county councillors, and a national average representation of 6.67%. This number decreased by one, since the 2004 elections, despite an increase in the number of candidates presenting for election. In the 2019 elections, 15.9% of the candidates were female. Mayo has a poor record in terms of the numbers of females elected to the County Council. Female local representation is limited currently, yet there are many reasons outlined in the literature as to why it is important for women to be represented at local level.

Importance of women’s representation at local council and community level

In her agenda for Europe, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen emphasised her commitment to gender equality. She stated that “we must focus on equality and creating chances for all, whether for women or men, whether from East, West, South or North, whether young or old” (Von der Leyen, 2019).

Bonaccina and Helgesen (2019: 6) highlighted the importance of equal representation in local politics, not just because of the responsibility of delivering service to the citizens locally, but also because it is at local level “that political profiles are shaped” and representation at a local level can be a stepping-stone to national politics. They argue that “parity will not be reached in parliaments and governments without a significant presence of women at the local level” (Bonaccini, S. and Helgesen, 2019). These statements underline the importance of appropriate levels of female representation in local government. Some substantial changes will be required to achieve this objective at local government level in Ireland.

³ Dáil or Dáil Éireann is the lower house of the Oireachtas (the Irish parliament). [<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/visit-and-learn/how-parliament-works/>]

⁴ The Oireachtas is the only body that has the power to make laws. The Oireachtas consists of a bicameral chamber and the President of Ireland. “Bicameral” means it comprises two Houses, a Lower House, Dáil Éireann, and an Upper House, Seanad Éireann. The Constitution states that the Government must answer to Dáil Éireann. [<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/visit-and-learn/how-parliament-works/>]

⁵ Note that the CSO and CEMR statistics are not precisely identical as CEMR separate out ‘Female mayors’ in their calculations and CSO include all female representatives in % calculations.

What women bring to politics

There have been numerous attempts globally, to articulate the answer to the question of the importance of female representation in politics. Many research studies highlight the positive impact of women in politics. At the opening session of The Commission on the Status of Women, the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan acknowledged that: “there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity...No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation.” (Annan, 2005).

At a global level more recently, analysis was conducted on whether gender matters in the fight against Covid-19. The analysis confirmed that female-led countries handled the outbreak best. When “women-led countries are compared to countries similar to them along a range of characteristics, they have performed better, experiencing fewer cases as well as fewer deaths” (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2020:9). It is this wide-lensed, empathetic approach based on principles of fairness, compassion and inclusion which de Bardin refers to as “heart centred values” that benefits all of society (2016). With this in mind it will be of interest to the people of Ireland in the coming years to reflect on how Ireland handled the outbreak of Covid-19, especially in relation to recent decisions where there were no women involved in the all-male team of 11 comprising The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), Government leaders and Government ministers (O’Toole, 2020).

Why there are not more women in politics

There have been many studies conducted both in Ireland and abroad which have attempted to identify why women are under-represented in national and local politics. The results claim the reasons range from motivational factors such as self-confidence and self-belief, to social and cultural factors and also structural and institutional factors (Buckley and Hofman, 2015; Cullen and McGing, 2019; Fawcett, 2017; McGing, 2013)

The Migrant community may encounter added barriers to entering politics, such as the lack of childcare because of their small social networks; they may be disadvantaged by having to canvass during the day when their children are at school, rather than in the evenings when more people are at home (Lima, 2020). An additional disadvantage, according to Lima (2020) is that these minority groups may also encounter racism.

How female representation can be increased

Buckley argues that if the Irish government is intent on increasing the number of women in the Dáil it is essential that there are more candidates elected at local level (Buckley and Hofman, 2015). This concurs with the view that while the single transferable vote (STV) system mostly works to women’s advantage, some of the larger political parties are reluctant to select men and women equally (McGing, 2013). It is also worth remembering that the quota system, introduced in 2012 to increase the number of female candidates in national elections, does not extend to local political elections (Buckley and Hofman, 2015). The experience, resources, name recognition and base of supporters that are gained as candidates in local elections serve women extremely well and act as the “springboard” for female representation at a national level (Buckley and Hofman, 2015).

We have identified the issues related to female representation globally and nationally, as written and described by the relevant reports and academic research. It is now time to review the lived experiences of women in Mayo.

The following two chapters, chapter Three and Four, document the stories; views and lived experiences of Mayo women who have accessed leadership positions in the community or in politics, in order to represent their own voices and/or the voices of others. Representative quotes and stories are provided from the conversations with elected political representatives or community and organisational representatives at local and county level. We begin in Chapter Three, by discussing the factors which emerged from conversations with local; community and organisational representatives and then, in Chapter Four we review the experiences of the elected political representatives from County Mayo.

Chapter 3

The experiences of female community and organisational representatives

Introduction to the findings from the mixed groups

This chapter presents the key findings and discussions of data collected from seven diverse groups with a total of 29 participants, as outlined in the introductory section of this report. Participants were members of one of the following groups and communities: The Youth group; The Sports group; The Farming community; The Traveller community; The Migrant community; The Business community or The Public Sector. Findings relate to the barriers experienced by women while engaging in community and organisational affairs in Mayo. Due to the variance in the level of political experience and resultant diversity of themes which emerged between the community groups and the elected representative groups, as previously outlined, findings are presented in two chapters. This chapter, Chapter Three, presents the findings from the seven groups outlined above and Chapter Four will present the findings from female political representatives who have represented constituents at county and/or national level.

Findings are presented in this chapter in three different sections: elements which were found to have impact on the individual; elements which were found to have impact at representative group level and thirdly, elements which were found to have impact at a wider societal or structural level. A brief summary of recommendations suggested by the participants to address concerns, are outlined after each section.

Elements which have impact at the level of the individual

Findings highlighted many individual factors which influenced the women's involvement in community and organisational affairs in Mayo. In the first instance, some of the individual motivations and challenges to becoming involved are outlined. Then the primary themes, which emerged from the data, and which impacted on the individual participants in the course of their involvement are discussed.

Individual motivations to become involved

At the outset, participants were asked about their personal motives for becoming involved as a community or organisational representative. This question was asked for the purpose of exploring, not just the motives for their involvement but whether they had become involved by choice, invitation, internal/external pressure or for any other reasons.

All of the participants who became involved in local communities or who accessed leadership roles within the organisations they were involved in, did so by choice and cited many reasons for their involvement including: having an interest in a particular organisation/club; filling a void for a particular service in their locality; supporting their own children who were involved in various clubs; becoming involved to be part of a support network in business; and/or to avail of the opportunity to have a voice for themselves as women, and for their wider community:

I think it's proper that women should have a voice. You feel you can talk on their [community] behalf as well as your own.

Some of the participants from the Migrant community group became involved in different clubs and organisations and found that volunteering in the community meant that, when they got to know people and people got to know them, their opinion was valued; they were allocated responsible roles in clubs and people began inviting them to different events. However, this experience was not the same for everyone.

Challenges influencing individual involvement: Imposed inferiority and generational differences

One of the participants from the Migrant community group decided not to become involved in any of the clubs or committees in her local area, but instead opted to become involved outside the locality where she lived. The reason for this was because she believed that local people "looked down on them" as a minority group. She also stated that most of the people running the organisations locally were in a much older age bracket than she was, and she preferred to mix with people, who she believed, may hold more modern views:

One of the challenges for me is that most of the groups are dominated by older people and I find it hard to interact with such age groups. ... I don't want to mingle with people who have ideas from the 19th Century.

However, the participant became actively involved in affairs away from where she lived and was content in her involvement there with a more diverse age group.

Language capability influencing involvement

While most of the women interviewed from the Migrant community group had fluency in the English language, some suggested that the ability to communicate effectively in the language is essential in order to become involved in the local community. The majority of participants agreed that many people in the Migrant community were at a disadvantage because they had little or no spoken English. One participant explained that the lack of fluency was a major hindrance to her:

Because, we don't speak English. I speak a little bit, so we don't involve [engage] with Irish people or with another community.

She went on to explain that there were some English classes available, but she did not attend as they were “just for beginners” and did not meet her needs. Lack of fluency in the English language was one of the reasons given by this participant for her lack of involvement in community affairs. There were also other reasons why a minority of individual women in other groups in this research chose not to be involved in particular organisations.

Situational challenges

Some of the participants across the different groups were involved, or had previously been involved, in several different community organisations over the years. While most of the women had not experienced challenges accessing committees or organisations, a minority had opted out of organisations because of individual negative experiences. One participant gave an example:

There was one other committee I was involved in where I left because it was not a good experience for a woman as there was a lot of derogatory remarks flying around the table.

The participants stated that they later joined other community organisations where they felt more comfortable.

Childcare and motherhood influencing individual involvement

Some of the participants who were involved in different organisations and local clubs for many years believed that other women chose not to become involved in community affairs because they were “minding the children”. One of the participants in the Youth group believed that being a mother may be a barrier to involvement for some people “*We must not forget that motherhood creates a barrier and causes inaccessibility for some*”. In contrast to this, a mother in one of the groups, who is active at county organisational level, stated that childcare was not a barrier for her and need not be a barrier to other women’s involvement in community affairs:

I don't necessarily believe it's about childcare to be honest. If you needed a childminder you would get one... It is [a barrier] if you let it.

In the conversations with the different groups, challenges were acknowledged, yet all of the participants continued to be involved in community affairs. The majority believed that individual personality traits and a person’s perception of oneself were important, when accessing leadership positions or when accessing roles in community affairs. The concept of confidence was one of the most frequent and recurring themes in the data set, across all of the groups interviewed in this research.

Confidence and self-perception

The majority of the participants believed that self-confidence was important in order to become involved in organisational leadership or to progress in their roles in community affairs. While many of the participants stated that they themselves did not lack confidence, they suggested that it was one of the main reasons why other women do not engage in community affairs, get involved in different organisations or seek to progress to leadership roles. Some participants from the Farming community group believed that a lot of the “women would be great, but they would not have the confidence to become involved”. According to the participants, confidence was essential when engaging and communicating with people effectively.

“ Our self-confidence and our belief in ourselves are hugely important to the way we progress and [it is important to be] aligned with people who believe in you also.

It does go back to the confidence, but if you're put down every day of the week, and if you're discriminated against, every ...day ...of ...the ...week [Slow and emphatic speech], what would that do to you? Would that give you confidence?

I'd like to see more Migrant women as well going for the roles, but I think it's a lack of confidence. ”

The relationship between competence and confidence emerged as a recurring theme in the discussions. The participants debated how this impacted on their roles in community affairs.

Linking confidence with competence

When the participants were probed on the connection between confidence and competence in relation to their involvement in community affairs and leadership in organisations in County Mayo, several were of the view that one's inner confidence impacts on their own, or on other people's perception, of their competency. According to many of the participants in this research, women underrepresent their own levels of competency yet in contrast, they believed that men often present themselves as more competent than they really are.

I think sometimes that lots of men can come across as being very confident. That doesn't necessarily mean they're competent, and I think for women sometimes, they can be very competent but not very confident, and I think a lot of these committees will misjudge confidence for competence.

These findings are in line with those from previous studies of a similar nature which support the notion that, in order to succeed, confidence is just as important as competence (Kay and Shipman, 2014). Some of the participants were of the view that confidence was a trait that one either innately had or had not. Others believed that confidence depended to a large extent on their parents and how people “were reared”. Several of the participants from different groups stated that their own confidence had improved since they became involved in community affairs and commented that being involved, brought women “out of themselves”. The view of one of the participants with several years of experience in community representation, was that many women were reluctant to become involved due to low self-esteem:

I think many women undervalue their worth and that's why they are hesitant to put themselves forward for the top table. I think there's a huge amount of competent and capable women, but I don't necessarily think that they believe they can do that. Whereas a man would put himself out there...

Continuing in the discussion, the same participant gave an example of a particular incident which supported her beliefs:

He put himself forward for the role. He could not put 2 or 3 words together... He wasn't shy but I don't think he was competent at all... Even me, I could put more words than him together, but I still would be far from believing in myself to do that.

Many of the participants across the different groups expressed their ideas on how self-confidence might be improved.

Recommendations related to building confidence

Several of the participants considered it important that women be encouraged to join committees. They believed that, if women were enabled to talk to other women and share their experiences, this may help to build their confidence.

Women need more solidarity and we need more talking to each other and we need to do more sharing. I think that would help women absolutely come out of their inner shells and inner struggle. ... I don't know how to do that, but I think that would be very helpful.

According to one of the participants the onus was on women to put themselves out there more:

... and I think as a woman we have to lean in and be, you know, really put ourselves out there to have the same chance as a guy who's just being confident.

Another suggestion was that women should join specific organisations which were set up for the purpose of women empowering women.

I really think that they [the specific organisations to support women] have fostered great stuff for an awful lot of women, and they have brought them out into the limelight.

Other participants were convinced that, as they built up their skill sets with training and education and became more competent in their roles, their confidence improved. One woman highlighted how this happened for her:

I think I'd be kind of strong in myself and confident, but I wouldn't say I've always been like that. When I went back [to education], I got to do courses, I realised that I can open doors with education for myself.

The topic of education and its role in building confidence and creating opportunities for people involved in community affairs was another recurring theme in this study. This was expressed in particular by many of the participants from minority community groups.

Value placed on education and training

Many participants believed that a certain level of education was required to be able to negotiate and express views effectively. When some of the participants from a minority community group initially got involved in community affairs and began training for their positions, they falsely believed that they did not have any of the necessary skills for the roles, until their many innate skills were pointed out to them, as one participant explained:

When I joined the ... at the very beginning, they were all talking about these things called skills, and we all said: 'sure we don't have skills to do this'. They [staff] told us: 'you have to have skills to take up a pen and write your name; It's a skill to put your child to bed at night; It's a skill to be a mother; It's a skill to be a listener' - you know what I mean.

The degree to which one's own standard of education was considered and valued varied enormously between the groups involved. In this research the greatest number of comments regarding the importance of education were attributed to the participants in the minority community groups, in particular to the women from the Traveller community group, where the majority of the women had left school early and had valued the opportunity to re-enter education as adults.

“ I realise that I can open doors with education for myself - like it builds you up. ”

According to the Traveller women, education was the best way forward and crucial to their progression, not just in community affairs but in life in general, and one woman was proud to share those views within her community:

We're just getting the word out there you know. It's the key to open all doors in life for you - education.

Some participants from the Farming group agreed that when they took leadership roles in their representative organisations, they “went in at the deep end” without any specific training and “just got on with it”. A small number of the participants from the Migrant community group stated that they immersed themselves in study and a minority “studied to a very high level” since they came to Ireland, but this was not the same for everyone in their community.

Difficulty accessing and continuing in education

Many of the women in the Migrant community group highlighted the difficulty they experienced in accessing education and training courses, because of their geographical location in rural Ireland. Although some of the women were currently involved, or had been involved in education in the past, this was at enormous cost because of the amount of time spent waiting for public transport or commuting and also the financial cost involved. Although the “women were more into education” than the men, one participant commented that it was easier for the men to access and commit to a course, as they could stay over during the week in the location where they were studying.

This was not an option for the women as they had to take care of the children:

I would say in terms of ... for men it might be a bit easier because they don't have...we still have the kids to get ready for school and schooling to get ready and those things, so our husbands and other men, they don't have that barrier to go study in different towns and things, so it's a little bit easier that way.

This outlook was reaffirmed in discussions with members of the Farming group, some of whom believed that women in general lose out on education in adulthood as, whether they are working outside the home or not, they are predominantly the people doing “the caring and doing the cooking and cleaning at home”.

Recommendations related to education and training

Many participants believed that further education and training were very important for women as it would increase their confidence and create more opportunities for them. Findings in this study suggest that education and “learning” has a strong emancipatory effect for members of the minority community groups, whereas it appeared to be of less relevance for participants in the other groups.

The Youth group emphasised the importance of practical educational initiatives which might include, in particular, exploring how to become involved in politics. An example was provided of an educational initiative one participant benefitted from. It involved a tour of The Dáil by a local female politician, giving a group of schoolgirls an insight into life as an elected representative:

... and all the entire class was in the Dáil and she explained her journey in politics and many in our class were not aware of what the journey was like. I got to experience that.

Most of the participants from the Youth group believed that that it was important to be exposed early in life to the possibility of a career in politics.

It is important to expose girls at a young age to local and national issues and learn how to form opinions and how to express them and debate them with people.

Individual intentions in relation to community and political representation

Participants were asked what their individual plans were for their futures in community affairs and whether they could see themselves going for election at local council level or beyond. Some expressed the view that in order to go forward as an elected representative, a person needed to have the aspiration to do so, in addition to a high degree of confidence and the requisite level of education. Some of the participants stated that they were content to continue in their current community role despite having the confidence and competence to go forward, as they were not interested in progressing to other roles for various reasons.

I'm educated enough and I can hold my own, but I just would have no interest in the political arena. Not at all, no.

Other participants in different groups expressed the view that they would be very capable going for election at county level, but that they would have great difficulty towing a party line. One participant from the Farming group, who was very active in many organisations for decades and had represented her organisation at European level, stated:

I was asked to go forward but I could never be involved in politics because I would want to have everyone with me, people of all parties and none. I would not be able to take sides.

In both the Public Sector and the Business community focus groups, a majority of the women did not hesitate in affirming that if a senior position arose, such as that of an organisational CEO, they would put themselves forward for the position. However, they were of the view that getting the job would be just the beginning of the challenge and they highlighted the importance of garnering support around them once in the position:

“ *When you get into a position, [you need support].. If somebody has a voice that voice needs to be supported. The battle is only beginning when the person gets the voice really.* ”

Lack of knowledge of the Irish political system was one of the reasons given by some members of the Migrant community group as to why they would not feel comfortable putting themselves forward:

I wouldn't feel very familiar going with politics and I wouldn't feel confident in that area at all, at all...I don't know the history.

This perspective was also found in a recent study of Migrant candidates' experiences in the 2019 local election. Candidates stated that they found the Irish political system complicated and it was important to learn about the system before campaigning for election (Lima, 2020).

Interestingly, half of the participants in the Traveller community group would value the opportunity to go forward for election. One participant would go forward, but only if she was nominated by a particular party:

I wouldn't mind now; I'd be open to every opportunity that'd come your way y'know. I'd like to be open to give anything a go.

Another participant commented that if “she did not have children”, there would be nothing to stop her putting herself forward as a candidate for local election. This concurs with other research findings which suggested that childrearing may be a factor influencing women's decisions to go forward for political roles (Campbell & Childs, 2014).

However, in addition to the confidence issue, which was presented earlier, another participant had a number of reasons why going forward for election was not for her:

As a travellerI wouldn't have the guts. No, not in a lifetime. Anyway, the settled people now, I wouldn't be taken seriously, I wouldn't get the votes, no. Because we don't get equality no. ... the risk of the racism bit, and the exclusion y'know...being a member of the travelling community. You'd feel that you're going to get that...

Participants in the Traveller group believed that a Traveller, going forward as a candidate for election, would only get votes from their own community and, because their numbers were small, they would not, therefore reach the necessary quota to get elected. While they would vote for any candidate who would support the Traveller community, the general population, they believed, may not vote for a Traveller candidate. Indeed, one participant went on to say that it was difficult for any member of her community to get elected. She stated that she was aware of candidates from the general population who, when they were canvassing from door-to-door seeking votes for themselves, were making promises to potential voters that, if elected, they would try to prevent Travellers from getting houses in the locality.

While some participants were not interested in community representation or pursuing a career as elected representatives, other individuals were constrained by fear, a lack of confidence and some by a lack of knowledge of the political system. There were some participants who, with support, would have no hesitation going forward for leadership roles. Others were conscious that the possibility for them to progress to an elected representative role was limited because they belonged to an ethnic minority group, which greatly reduced their chances of them being elected.

As stated earlier, findings in this research are broken down into three different sections. The following section outlines findings which have impact at representative group level.

Elements which have impact at representative group level

Discussions related to the importance of female representation in leadership and community roles

At the level of the representative groups, research participants discussed their experiences of involvement and progress in community affairs in leadership roles in their representative organisations. Many of the participants in the different representative groups outlined reasons why they believed it was important for women to be involved as leaders or community representatives. Some participants across the different groups believed that women brought a different perspective to matters in community affairs and others suggested that women see things that men do not see. Many considered that it was essential for women's views to be considered in relation to different topics that directly affect women:

Without women being involved and having a voice, there are so many issues involved like childcare, et cetera, that it is so important.

One of the participants, who had spent many years involved in community affairs, highlighted the major disservice to women in terms of continuing in public service or within roles as leaders in the community, with the introduction of the marriage bar, imposed by a male led government:

For example, if we take the marriage ban [bar] it was mostly a male dominated government that we had at the time and it was only women that had to get out when they got married.

Some of the younger participants were of the view that, as women make up roughly half of the population they should be represented in politics in the same ratio, and it was also important for young women to have female role models.

Gender specific issues were discussed frequently among participants in the focus groups and within the semi-structured interviews. Several factors were considered to have an impact on the course of their involvement at representative group level.

Gender related bias and the 'Token Woman'

A minority of participants working in community roles considered that they were in their current roles as a direct result of their gender. They believed that they were the 'Token Woman' in a situation where there was an onus on the organisation to employ a woman. While they enjoyed being in the role and were qualified and felt competent in it, they would have preferred that their competencies and skills be acknowledged as the primary justification for their appointment to the role. Some believed that being appointed as the 'Token woman' worked to their disadvantage when in the role:

There are huge gender issues. It's like 'what does she know? What are you doing here? Why are you asking that?'. They had to be seen to have a woman involved, and I felt I was the Token Woman.

The view of many participants from the Public Sector group was that women were appointed to some roles because of their gender and that there was some evidence that little consideration was given to the positive contributions that they would bring to the organisation:

Some community organisations are good, some may have an equality policy, and some may not, but some are very much just lip service like 'we could do with a few more women in the board'. They don't see the advantage of bringing a different perspective or bringing a different lens to the communities. It's just about optics.

A minority of participants acknowledged that the concept of the 'Token woman' was necessary in order to increase the representation of women in some community roles. Many women across the different groups agreed that the most competent person should be appointed regardless of gender. However, it was clearly stated by one participant that there is huge bias and inequality when appointments are being made. Participant across all groups were of a similar view and either had witnessed or experienced gender bias, in their involvement in community affairs or when they were attempting to access leadership roles in their organisations.

Gender related bias against women

Two participants from the Farming community group stated that they did not encounter any gender bias in any of the committees in which they were involved. They believed that their contribution was perceived as of “equal value” to that of the male members. One of the women from the Farming community group, who was experienced in working in several committees and organisations, stated:

I never saw any gender bias anywhere or in anything I was involved in and I was in lots and lots of committees. I never found that I was ever excluded because I was a woman.

However, the same participant from the Farming community group stated that she was aware that gender bias was evident in some committees where “the men would see themselves as superior”. The issue of gender bias against women, was a recurring theme experienced across all of the groups involved at local community level in Mayo. Sometimes the anticipation of potential gender bias was enough to prevent some people from becoming involved in the first place, as expressed by one of the participants from the Business community group:

It's very difficult sometimes as a younger woman to get onto these committees. And ...I think it's very difficult as one lone single female going into an organisation where there is a lot of older males, you know.

In many of the focus groups the women shared and compared their personal experiences of gender bias and it was one of the topics which invited most participant engagement. Some believed:

It's just an attitude, that they think: 'well. I'm right and you're wrong. Just because I'm a man and you're a woman'.

Some of the participants in a minority community group believed that men had more of a say at meetings than the women from the same community.

... there are some lads with us ... [at the meetings], and they seem to get more attention. I know myself that I know more than the two of them put together, but they seem to get more attention. They get listened to more.

In one of the focus groups, two participants agreed that the gender bias against women was “way worse” in rural Ireland than it was in the towns and cities. If that assumption is accurate then it might explain, to some extent at least, why in the 2019 local elections in Mayo, in the principally rural electoral districts of Claremorris-Swinford and Westport-Belmullet no female representative was elected to the county council. This was despite the fact that there were female candidates in those areas, albeit vastly outnumbered by male candidates (McGreal, 2019). The two women who were elected, represent the urban areas of Castlebar and Ballina respectively.

Women encouraged to apply for supportive roles

Some of the women across the different groups stated that when they were presenting themselves for a more responsible role at committee and/or organisational level, they were dissuaded from doing so by male members who were also going for the role. One of the women outlined her experience:

Even though I was the qualified one for the job, he tried to put me off and said: 'would you not go for the assistant ... [specified role specified].'

This view was common among many participants in the different groups. They believed that the top table positions and leadership roles in most of the organisations were male dominated. This, it was claimed, is the case in many of the GAA clubs, and some stated that the positions were held by the same people for many years. This finding is not just relevant to local community organisations but is also reflected in commercial organisations nationally, according to Bríd Horan, co-founder of the 30% club (Ireland). While almost half of junior management roles are held by women at national level, less than one-third of the executive directors are women (Horan, 2019). Similar findings by Buckley et al. (2013) suggested that across party politics, a higher percentage of women were in supportive roles, such as secretary and treasurer, compared to men who mostly held leadership roles, such as that of chairperson (Buckley and Hofman, 2015).

However, the future might be getting brighter for women, as this research, the experiences of some of the younger participants, when going forward for leadership roles, were different to those who had been involved in community affairs for many years, as one of them explained:

I might be that bit younger, maybe I think there was a perception there at one stage, where it was just for the big boys, but that's certainly not the case nowadays.

Most participants discussed the fact that much networking and canvassing for leadership positions and top-table roles happened outside the structure of the organisation and resulted in important decisions being made, for the most part without open discussion.

I've been on a lot of committees and I would say outside committees, in a lot of cases, is where the decisions are made.

This apparently common occurrence may be explained by the networking advantage that men seem to avail of. One participant pointed out that men have “their golf outings” as one means of networking. According to a recent study, men have an advantage over women when canvassing in this way as women are less well positioned to have access to the resources required to build and maintain networks (Cullen and McGing, 2019). The practise of seeking support outside the structure of meetings, rather than at local committee and organisational level, is reminiscent of the informal concept of ‘localism’ which has been described as traditionally being part of potential candidates’ recruitment and nomination for politics (Culhane, 2017).

Experience of exposure to comments of a sexual nature

During the discussions within the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews, participants were not asked specifically whether they had experienced any comments of a sexual nature directed towards them. However, in the discussion around gender bias many of the participants across the seven groups disclosed incidents where they had witnessed or experienced remarks and/or innuendoes of a sexual nature. While none of the woman were prepared to repeat exactly the words that were said, some, from separate community groups, gave examples of particular instances. One participant, who held a particular leadership role in an organisation comprised mostly of men, remarked that men would make comments to her on the phone “that they definitely would not say to a man”, and yet another woman stated that she was subjected to comments of a sexual nature at a particular organisational meeting and tended to blame herself for her lack of understanding of the Irish sense of humour, as she was originally from a different culture. She explained:

Maybe it's just a cultural thing. People have that great sense of humour and sometimes that it's just a self-reflection that I need to take myself with a little bit of a sense of humour, ...but he would not have said that to a man.

Further, in spite of the improving gender equality in the younger generation referenced by participants in the Youth group, and their assertions in relation to rising above any perceived gender bias, one of the Youth group participants mentioned that she was fed up listening to the pejorative “get back to the kitchen jokes”.

Recommendations to address gender bias

A participant from the Business community group shared her experience of introducing an awareness of gender balance into an organisation, in which she was involved:

I brought in awareness of gender balance, not that... but they just hadn't thought about it, and so I was the one really who brought that in; and once it was said, it automatically became the norm. Like, I think, men just don't think about it because they're task focused and just don't think...

However, according to many participants, not every club/organisation were as open to creating gender balance except to “tick the box” to be seen to have women involved. There were mixed views about how to ensure there was gender balance in organisational roles. One of the participants stated that people should be appointed to roles because they were the most competent person for the position, and not because of their gender:

... and they need to be appointed on merit, not just because they're a woman and they're ticking the box.

Another participant from the same focus group agreed that appointments should be made on merit and went on to say that “we need to see more women in the governance of organisations.” Continuing with their discussion on gender bias, and concurring with many participants in different groups, the women agreed that having a gender balance in organisations was better than having all one gender, as one of the women explained, cautioning against an excessive number of females in leadership roles in an organisation:

I think sometimes with a lot of women, all women, that's another hardship. If you can have a balance of the two.[If there are excessive numbers of one gender] I would worry that everyone is trying to get ... always trying to have the upper hand. If you could have one [club/organisation accommodating men and women equally] it would be great, but you can't have the one if somebody's always trying to have the upper hand. Yeah, and... that leads to huge issues. Then that leads to huge conflict and causes more problems.

According to another participant in the Public Sector community group the issue of tenure needed to be addressed:

I was just thinking about tenure. Like, tenure would make a change in a lot of organisations. What happens in a lot of groups is nobody wants to challenge the ten-year-old committee.

Some of the participants also believed that women needed to believe in themselves more. One of the women from the Business community group commented that:

I think it is our own perception often times of ourselves, you know. Do we ask for the roles? Are we, you know, are we putting ourselves forward? Are we? You know, if we are on any of those committees we have as much right as anybody else, you know.

This participant went on to say:

And I think it needs to start with us and show our values and listen to the beat of our own drum.

Significant effort, it was suggested, should be made to address sexist comments or remarks which were experienced by some people across the different groups. Leadership with progressive values is required, and systems should be put in place within organisations to deal with offensive or inappropriate remarks, as one participant outlined:

...the bias, that has to be squashed out from very early on. It's those off the cuff remarks that are said all the time that somebody needs to say: 'no, stop sorry now, but you can't say that' and 'no, that's not acceptable'.

Several of the participants in this research believed that the perceived gender bias in favour of men was related to Irish culture and it was “more to do with tradition, and that mould has not yet been broken”. Tradition here is understood as the passing down of customs, habits and beliefs from one generation to another. Based on the experiences of many of the participants across the different community groups in this research, there appear to be some deep rooted systemic and cultural traditions which are being played out at a conscious or subconscious level.

Elements which have impact at a wider societal or structural level

Reference was made earlier in this report to the definition and origins of culture in society. The culture of a society consists principally of the ideas, “social behaviour and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups”(Tylor, 2011). During this research, participants discussed how societal views and systemic stereotyping of traditional gender roles and related discrimination adversely impacted on their experiences in community representation. To validate this assertion, the controversial Article 41.2 enshrined in the Irish Constitution is referenced here. In the Article there is an inherent assumption about the traditional roles of women in Irish society, which perceives the woman as the primary caregiver within the home.

Perceptions of traditional female gender stereotypical roles

Some members of the Youth group commented that “older people believed there was a particular role for women” in society, but that they themselves believed they could do anything they wished regardless of gender. Indeed, some of the long serving participants in the different community groups in this research also discussed the perceived stereotypical cultural role of women in society. A common reflection on the role of the woman related to their perceived primary duty, which was to look after the children and to do the housework. The following participant’s comment was echoed by others when she stated:

... because like that the lads would never be expected to put up the dinner. It would be very rare that they would have to put up the dinner or do the housework.

Another participant suggested that some people in her community believed that:

... as a Traveller woman, [the attitude is] and probably the same with the general population as well, you’re not supposed to be anywhere but the kitchen sink.

When the discussions were analysed, it is clear that the women in this study believed that the responsibility for the care of the household and the children mostly fell to women, even if they were working outside the home.

Recommendations for tackling the stereotypical female role

Many of the participants believed that gender stereotypical roles were instilled from an early age at home. To deal with this, the women across most of the groups believed that teaching young girls about gender equality at home was one way to begin to address the divide between the expected roles for men and women as they get older:

“ Empowering from childhood and education – changing those ideas of women, and body image and all that – helping women define their inner power from an early age. That we are on equal terms – we are creators of that life. ”

Women are minding the children, more often than not, more than men anyway. So, we need to educate the young girls about a balance at home, equality at home and give them the time and the chance to get involved in things like community work.

One participant commented that society as a whole needed to adopt a more equal system.

I think trying to get equality for women isn’t necessarily the way about it. I think we have to look... it’s more a multi-systemic thing the way that society is set up.

While most of the participants were concerned about the traditional cultural and structural factors directed against the female gender some community groups were mainly concerned with societal challenges which faced their communities in general, such as racism and discrimination.

Discrimination and racism

Although reference to discrimination was not directly mentioned in any of the questions to the participants, it arose during the discussions and interviews with three separate groups and emerged as a prominent theme in relation to some communities. While the discrimination described against community groups was, for the most part, not gender-specific, some forms of discrimination appeared to have more of an impact on women. Discrimination against the Traveller community was by far the most frequently mentioned.

As outlined earlier in this chapter, the participants from the Traveller community group highlighted the discrimination that, either they themselves or people they knew, were exposed to on a regular basis in their dealings with the general population. Some believed that this affected the mental health of some members of their community:

But that still affects them through their lives some way, because: they can get depressed; they can feel put down; they can feel themselves not good enough and that could be a lot of the reason that a lot of women are not going out and doing things or even men as well, because they think they're not good enough.

As the traditional role of women in Ireland was perceived by some as the homemaker and mother who did not generally work outside the home, it appears that Traveller women who got involved in community roles were unusual in their community. These women were breaking new ground to some degree within their ethnic community. One participant explained that, in general, the man is seen as “the head of the household” in her community. This is despite the fact that the women who were interviewed from the Traveller community group in this research, appeared to be all leaders in their own right. Many of them explained how they were “a voice for their community”; others stated that they “supported their community” whenever they could. It was women who “accessed support services” when required and many of the women were the main promoters of health care, while others were encouraging members of their community to go forward in education. The idea that men are perceived as the head of the household is not unique to the Traveller community. A recent study in Ireland found that 26% of young people, under the age of 25 believed that a man should be head of a household (Safe Ireland, 2019).

The Traveller community in general faced discrimination outside their community, and alongside this there was a perceived traditional role inside their community.

Because in our culture we don't talk to other men. Well we talk, but not the way ye [general population] talk. It's how we're brought up. It's the culture.

According to some of the participants, the exclusion experienced by them at committee meetings was, they believed, because they were members of the Traveller community more so than because they were women:

... because we hear what's going on at the table, but I don't think we get enough respect at the table, being a member of the Traveller Community, because I think they don't want to hear you having a voice.

In addition to this, however, as previously stated, the men from the Traveller community were perceived as being listened to more at meetings than the women. It appears, therefore, that Traveller women are subject to more than one discriminatory barrier in relation to becoming community representatives. This concurs with the notion of Intersectional Discrimination as described by Crenshaw (1989) who suggests that some ethnic minority groups are subject to multiple layers of discrimination.

Other minority groups in this study faced similar layers of discrimination. A number of the women in the migrant community group stated that they were the victim of racist comments. One of the women said that she felt as if she had to prove herself more to people outside her community:

Why should I have to prove myself to them. They don't have to prove themselves to me.

The following remark, from a participant in one of the groups involved in community affairs, resonated strongly with the view of one of the political representatives in relation to gender equality and women “holding themselves back”:

The women are not giving themselves equality with the men because they don't believe the men should be sweeping the floor and cooking the dinner or at the table with the children doing the homework.

While most women believed that they were supported by their families and communities, instances were also described where participants were met with negativity regarding their roles outside the home, from both men and women in their own community. In this research, discrimination was not just confined to minority community groups. It appeared to exist where there was any form of diversity. One woman who had a child with extra needs described a few instances where her son was a victim of discrimination. At times she believed people “who should have known better” did not see him as “being a person with feelings”.

While a minority of women in the migrant community experienced overt racism, other participants agreed that racism was less obvious. Some believed that they were subjected to role stereotyping to fit into roles and prescribed careers, such as those in the caring profession, which did not interest many of them:

There is this kind of stereotype that people feed into when they come into the system, as you are entered into the system. The first thing you hear from people is uh, ... care of the elderly. And, maybe you are able to work at the health care [profession]. It is not good enough. I don't want to be a carer.

It was evident from the findings that discrimination and racism against minority communities are widespread in society in general, contributing to low representation, especially of women, in community affairs and in broader political representation. Some of the participants offered recommendations as to how society may begin to address some of the issues discussed.

Recommendations to address discrimination

Participants believed that it was important to find ways to practice equality and respect for each other. The women from the Traveller community group believed that education was the key to their progression and that it may even contribute to lessening the discrimination directed against their community:

I swear now by education. Education is the way forward. It'll make change for our community and for our lives. It'll stop discrimination because God knows it's needed.

However, the Traveller women also believed that until the wider community and the Traveller community engaged, communicated and understood each other better, discrimination would continue:

Yeah, and until that happens, until they communicate, this discrimination will never go away.

The women had ideas on how this could be achieved. They could go into schools and show the children how to, for example, make flowers from paper and other crafts that had been passed down from generation to generation of women in their community. Samples of such demonstrations were recently released online by the Mayo Travellers' Support Group (MTSG, 2020). The men also had many skills and crafts which they could share with school children. One of the women from the Traveller community group believed that improved laws at the level of societal governance were necessary to deal with incidents of discrimination against her community.

Some participants from the Migrant community group believed that in order to become integrated into the local community, that the community needs to embrace asylum seekers, stop the racism and change their attitudes towards the Migrant community. One of the participants suggested that there should be no such thing as identifying people with a label, as everyone is a person in their own right:

People should take labels away from each other ...that you are a person. You're not the migrant or asylum seeker. Something like that. ... Then your level of importance drops (as a Migrant), yes, you are a person who has a lot to give.

A participant from another community group, who had witnessed discriminatory remarks against someone with extra needs, highlighted the importance of challenging and addressing such remarks, in order to educate the wider public.

When asked whether they believed that discriminatory societal cultural and traditional views of females were changing in order to improve opportunities for women involvement in community affairs and the broader political landscape, many participants were of the view that there was no change happening:

I don't know because overall it hasn't changed, and the power dynamic hasn't changed.

Some participants were of the opinion that discrimination against their community appeared to be getting worse, especially in their particular locality. Yet, according to many of the younger participants, improvement was noticeable in some areas.

Change is happening slowly for some

Some of the younger participants in the Traveller community suggested that old traditions are slowly being eroded and positive cultural shifts are happening gradually, because of both societal changes and also because of changing circumstances within households:

The men do a lot more that they would have done years ago, such as: minding the baby; looking after the baby; changing the baby; feeding the baby and letting the woman out to work, because they see that it affects the money for the pocket or for the table...

We women were held back for years, but now women are coming out more in front. I don't know, but then again in my home, it was equal, and Dad didn't have the whole say. It was equal.

While change might be happening slowly, many participants across the different community groups believed that there was still a long way to go, while others were of the view that it was difficult to implement change:

You're not going to change them. No, not some of their attitudes ... some areas will never be changed.

It appears that change in the Traveller community is being driven by the Traveller women:

Yeah, I'd be very into change now and pushing the children to go forward into education and pushing my husband...that it's not a woman's job to be cleaning the house, you know...equally.

Summarising chapter 3

This chapter presented the key findings and discussions of data collected from 29 participants in seven diverse groups. Findings revealed motivating influences for involvement as well as some challenges experienced by individuals. Confidence and self-perception emerged as the dominant theme that impacted directly on the individual. The value placed on education by participants from particular groups also emerged as an important theme, as well as childcare and motherhood, but to a lesser extent. Gender bias was the prominent theme which impacted at the level of the representative group. At the wider societal and structural level, female gender stereotyping emerged as the dominant challenge in the majority of the community groups, while for some minority groups discrimination and racism emerged as major barriers. Recommendations by the participants were outlined for each of the themes identified.



Chapter 4 Women in political representation

Introduction

This chapter deals with the findings drawn from the conversations with political representatives in County Mayo. In the previous chapters, overarching themes which were important to the other groups of research participants were outlined. However, there are several issues which emerged in the discussions with politicians, which did not emerge in the other groups.

Levels of emphasis placed by the political representatives on some themes such as, for example, the incidences of discrimination or low self-confidence, differed considerably from the levels of emphasis placed by those in the other seven groupings. Further, many of the politicians' commentaries reference their current or past experiences within political roles, these are therefore not comparable in some respects with findings from the other groups. It was decided, therefore, to document the findings from the political representatives separately.

In the final chapter of this report, chapter 5, conclusions drawn from all the findings in this study are summarised and recommendations which have originated from participants' suggestions are presented. However, before the conclusions or recommendations are reviewed, the voices and views of the elected women who have represented or are currently representing the County of Mayo are gathered together in this chapter.

It is important to note, when reading this chapter, that all the quotations presented below are anonymised, and that any names given, are pseudonyms. This is in line with researcher ethics and an agreed policy to protect the identity of some of the participants who did not want their identity to be known.

Profiling the political representatives in this study

Female political representatives interviewed in this research study currently are, or have been political representatives at local, county or national level. All the political representatives were interviewed using a semi-structured interview style and these research participants preferred, in the main, one to one interviews over focus group discussions. There were some focus groups conducted but in many cases one to one interviews were preferred, principally because it was difficult to get a time and date that might coincide for these busy women. All research participants in this chapter have represented Mayo constituencies in recent years. They were asked the same questions as the other study participants (see appendix 3 for interview schedule). Interview and focus group prompts pursued the stories which lay behind the politicians' experiences of accessing; selecting and pursuing a role in community or political representation.

One of the issues that emerged as having a strong impact on the political representatives' choice of a career in politics or leadership in community representation, related to the characteristics of, and substantial commitments involved in, the political career and lifestyle. The long hours and public expectations of around the clock availability are challenges which these participants claim, regularly adversely affect their work-life balance. The conditions and challenges within the political career referenced are, in the main, gender-neutral ones. In other words, it is assumed that the same challenges would affect both male and female political representatives in many respects, though only female politicians are interviewed in this study.

The reason for the emphasis on the conditions and challenges of the political lifestyle and political career is clear. These political representatives know what a career and a lifestyle in community representation is like. They have personally been implicated in the frequently lengthy; highly challenging and often conflictive run up to standing for election and to becoming an elected candidate for their constituency. They have the benefit of hindsight and perspectives gained from experience. In contrast, relatively few of the research participants from the other groupings in this study, had represented their communities to the degree and level of the political representatives.

Like the other participant groupings, however, the issues of positive and negative gender bias and gender balance were discussed frequently. In addition, significant emphasis was placed on the need to build confidence among aspiring female community leaders and reference was made to the modest perception of self which, participants claim, often inhibits females from putting themselves forward for roles. Further issues, referenced frequently in this group, related to the importance of education and knowing how to become involved in politics; the cultural and traditional positioning of women in Irish society; experiences of speaking out and the provision for childcare in the political career.

The following paragraphs outline these issues. These issues are presented under three generic headings: elements having impact at the level of the Individual; elements which have impact at representative group level and elements which have impact at a wider societal or structural level. In addition, there is a fourth heading in this chapter which relates specifically to lived experiences of the politicians during their political career, this section is called: Political lifestyle and career challenges.

Participant quotes are selected as representative of more widespread views among the group of politicians, unless otherwise stated. Names given are pseudonyms. Views are outlined, insofar as is possible, in the participants' own words.

Elements which have impact at the level of the Individual

A recurring theme in the conversations with the political representatives about their experiences accessing political roles was the need for a healthy perception of self and the conscious development of self-confidence in their own abilities. The benefits of engaging with educational initiatives and specific and focused skills' training for the political role were also discussed as were the motivations to get involved in political roles. The factors presented in this section relate principally to individual characteristics, skills or motivations and how these had impact on the participants' choice to pursue a career in politics.

“ What is in their own heads [...] that's what's stopping them from being in politics. ”

Confidence and self-perception

The group of female political representatives who participated in this research express themselves as confident ambitious women who have succeeded in becoming elected representatives at county level and/or at national level. However, as the representative quote above states, many of the politicians interviewed believe that women in general prevent themselves from going forward because they often do not have sufficient confidence in themselves or in their own ability to succeed in a role. Though this group exhibited high levels of confidence and spoke of the opportunity to progress as a female in politics being open to them, they also referenced the existence of an underlying modesty which tends to inhibit the female political aspirant.

I would never have been short on confidence in my own ability to progress and move forward and certainly I think we need to see a female Taoiseach, there is no doubt about that, [...] that would have been an aspiration [to progress to the highest level].

Once I had my platform, I could have progressed. Yeah, 'cause I was in the Ard Comhairle. I was elected on onto it you know that is the governing body.

A healthy degree of self-confidence is essential when you are competing for a political position and this, according to Sile and Uaneen, does not come as naturally to aspiring female community representatives as it does to their male counterparts.

I'm not saying that all women don't have confidence like this, but I'm just saying I think men have more confidence, but they're so used to just putting themselves out there that it's a big task for a woman to put themselves forward.

Women, they claim, are more modest and less adept at putting themselves forward.

To be able to compete on an equal level for those positions, you need to be actually doing the ask.[for support] And I think again that's where women can often fall down in in asking because we tend to be by nature more modest.

Uaneen found the process of being photographed for posters and 'selling' her name as a politician quite difficult.

“ So, I suppose for me the hardest thing for me when I look back the most difficult thing for me going into politics was actually getting my picture taken, it was actually having to go to a photographer and having to ask him to take my photograph for a poster and it’s selling yourself. That’s a really difficult task for women because we’re doers. ”

Women tend to need more reassurance to put themselves forward for positions and take less risk than their male counterparts in this regard

And it’s like this is what in the working environment as well in [the political arena]. We will only go for jobs that we think we have all of the criteria ticked off, whereas men will think, ah sure, I have two or three of those. You know, I’m good enough, I’ll be able to do the job.

In sum, to address this factor which can inhibit women from putting themselves forward, the message from these political representatives to aspiring female politicians is that *“good enough is good enough”*. According to Sile:

We [women] tend to think that we have to excel in all of the requirements to be able to apply in the first instance, and that can be that. This translates into the political arena’.

Women need to go ahead and present themselves for leadership positions in community and political representation. They need to take small risks in relation to their perception of their capabilities and become more assertive and confident in their ability to do the job.

Conscious motivations towards presenting for a political role

It’s great to get into politics as a young person because you take on things that you wouldn’t dream of taking on when you’re older.

When asked what motivated them towards a career as a community leader or political representative, the politicians interviewed explained that the principal reason was to have *“their voice represented”* (Uaneen). Having worked as a community representative for several years to combat poverty and address societal inequalities, Sile had found herself *“knocking, begging at the doors of politicians, in Mayo to ask them to represent me”*. She felt that the issues she wanted addressed were not sufficiently represented and she decided to *“take that jump and get in there”*. Sile wanted to drive home the message to all those women doing great work as community representatives that they need to get elected to have influence over decision-making if they want change to come about. She explained that *“the decisions are made in political chambers; they are made in your County Council and in the Dáil’*. The decisions are made in the places where you have representative bodies.

In order to have a voice at that table, whether it’s the drugs task force or whatever, whatever it is for, to have a voice, you have to get elected to that body

Education

In relation to education, more references were made by participants in this grouping to the practical know-how and skill set required to become a political representative than were made to the contribution of formal third level education to accessing a career in politics. Although Catherine talked about the *“wealth of experience that that you bring to the job when you are educated”*, having tertiary level qualifications is not a prerequisite:

“ That’s the one thing about politics. You know if you’re chosen as a candidate, you can be the milkman, the bread man. You can be a college professor a doctor, it really doesn’t matter. I think the most important thing is the end of the day is that you have your organisation you have their pull and the community behind you. ”

Maura's view coincided with Catherine's and she explained that in her experience there never was any suggestion that formal qualifications were necessary for a political role.

Most references to learning made in this grouping were focused on finding out about joining a political party; "knowing how" to get into political representation and developing the negotiation and communications' skill set which is invaluable in public representation. Eileen, Bernie and Catherine described how they had attended courses in communications' skills and had learnt high level negotiation skills during their early political careers.

According to most of the participants in this group, "knowing how" to access a political career frequently came from having the benefit of family involvement and from observation of a relative who had been a political representative or a member of a political party. As Eileen said:

They will come up to the count on the day. Just sort of my sister's kids and like my own little nephew, and nieces, they have all seen what it takes [to become an elected representative]. My nieces, now they have grown up now with me and their mother canvassing and going through the election process and they've seen us, and they've seen what I can do. And they know if we can do this, they can. I think if you grow up to see something possible or you see something being done, it becomes possible. It's not so unachievable. Whereas when you grow up like I did, nobody in my family were ever in politics. How do we even get started?

The problematic issue of "how do we even get started" on a political career emerged as a repetitive theme in this study and the discussions were not limited to the political representatives. According to Maura:

It can be difficult to get involved; I mean. Parties are quite open; you can join online and sign on. You can go to your local meeting, but it's one of those kind of, it's one of those things that people always say to me. How do you get involved?, or where do you go? You know, so people feel it's not as accessible as it is, and I think if there was more of an exposure at younger level..[it would be better].

Yet, it is expected that "you would be involved with the local [political] organization" and that you might serve as an officer on the board and get to know people and "cut your teeth little bit before you before they put you on the ticket".

The politicians interviewed had "cut their teeth" in community representation. They spent many years representing their community at local level before moving on to a county or national level. This phenomenon is referred to in relevant research reports as "Pipeline Theory" which describes the fact that candidates who have gained experience through previous service at the subnational level are best positioned for seats at national level (Fiona Buckley et al., 2014).

For 10 years before I entered politics at all, I was a community representative. I worked as a community development worker. I managed projects. And I was involved in a voluntary capacity and had set up different organizations.

Key recommendations at individual level

The consensus among these participants is that becoming a leading community representative is a process, which has a "steep learning curve". It takes time to develop the skills to become a community leader and, in particular, to become known and trusted within your community before you consider putting yourself forward with a view to competing successfully for election. The message to be learned here is that "women must first gain experience in lower-level or local and county level position before moving up successfully through the pipeline to higher-level bodies" (Buckley et al., 2015). According to the representatives in this study "we're not exposing women to politics early enough" either. In addition, participants identified a need to mainstream the process of joining a political party and provide greater awareness around the processes involved in standing for election and becoming a community leader.

Elements which have impact at representative group level

Gender related biases

The female political representatives in this study referred to gender-related issues at local, county and national levels inside the political community. The impact of the striking imbalance in numbers of male versus female representatives; references to incidences of positive and negative bias and the importance of support from fellow female representatives were the principal issues which emerged in this regard. The most impactful aspect, according to participants, related to the feeling of being the “outsider” as the lone female voice in a male-dominated environment.

You do feel very much the outsider. You know, because you are [...] it's just even the jokes by the boys.

Uaneen, Catherine, Sile and Maura all spoke of their experiences of speaking out as a lone female voice in the midst of a legislative chamber surrounded by males.

Everything about it is male, the elected representatives are male, the senior civil servants that you're working with are male. The managers, now this is changing slightly, you know, I think there are some improvements in terms of that aspect, but it's a very male culture and male environment.

There were some very positive comments about male colleagues in the political chambers:

Every one of them (fellow councillors) they've been so kind and helpful

However, the dominant perception among participants was that speaking out in such a male dominated environment left some of them feeling “very vulnerable” on their own but they “couldn't show it”. Representatives explained that sometimes they felt it was not safe to speak out. Catherine spoke of being at political party conferences of over a thousand delegates a little over ten years ago where there were probably only “about 10 women”. She explained that, “it's difficult for women to emerge” in such a male dominated environment, though you might be perfectly capable, in fact more capable than some of your male counterparts.

Truthfully, you probably think you're better than 95% of them because a lot of men tend to get through the gates that as a woman, you never would.

Maura's experience concurs, according to her:

“ Women have to work twice as hard [to prove themselves, if you're a man, there's an assumption that you're capable until proven otherwise. And if you're a woman, there is an assumption that you're not capable until you prove you are. ”

Women do not support women

Support from fellow female politicians was not always forthcoming:

This is the thing in politics, women don't support women

Women have “put up with [inappropriate comments in political circles] for years” according to Bridie and Uaneen and yet, do not speak out to support their female counterparts when these issues are challenged by a lone female voice. In fact, to survive as a lone female in a male dominated environment, some women behave like men, in order to survive the political “jungle”. However, on the rare occasions when the female collegial support was there, it was reassuring and welcome, particularly when it came to the debate around certain issues:

It was really reassuring to have another woman in the room and when certain issues came around, I'd come out really strong and the next thing out of nowhere there would be some support and it was because there was some common bond. A common understanding [...] and it wasn't that she was supporting me as such. It was that, it was that there was a common understanding, an instinct and collegial female instinct that this was the right thing to do.

As the first female representatives in their constituencies at local, county and national level, several of the women in this study spoke about how they had “broken through a lot of gender barriers”. It is clear that these female political representatives from Mayo, despite being in the minority in legislative chambers, do have strong voices, and they make them heard.

Recognition was given to the greater impetus by the political parties to ensure greater gender representation in national political circles. There are gender quotas and there is active encouragement at party level to ensure more women are on the “ticket” (presenting themselves for election). Maura said she was encouraged by her party colleagues to run for election and that she always felt as she progressed through the ranks, like as if she “was pushing an open door”. However, this movement towards equal representation of genders in the political arena is not moving fast enough.

We’re not coming up with the solutions that are serving all of society, we are leaving too many people behind and I believe that the gender imbalance influences the fact that we’re leaving so many people behind and we’re leaving too many gaps in legislation.

The pace of change is too slow for Sile who strongly believes that for society to progress, the gender imbalance must be addressed with urgency. She believes that the fact there is such gender imbalance in political representation has a detrimental impact on legislative decision-making, leaving too many people behind. The gender balance issue and the imposition of quotas to address that, do present several conflicting issues for the participants.

Due consideration must be given to the process of gender imbalance correction. The narrative around “the need for more young women in politics” and “the need for women of different ages” is offensive to Sile and other participants, who do not agree with selection processes based on how someone looks or what age they are. Rather than being selected for a position “because of the need for gender balance” the aim must be to select who is best for the job (Eileen, Bernie and Maura). These views mirror those which emerged in the other representative groups presented earlier in Chapter 3. Catherine said that she did not originally believe in the need for gender quotas:

“ *I’m as good as any man. I fight my corner on an equal footing.* ”

However, now she understands that they are important to achieve that critical representative number of women in political circles. The importance of initiating and maintaining gender quotas is critical, according to Buckley et al. (2015) in particular, at local legislature level, as gender balance disparities at local level are stark and gender barriers persist (Buckley and Hofman, 2015).

Being within a female minority, however, does present some limited advantages and these were acknowledged:

It was a huge help being the only female on the ticket. It was more of a help than a hindrance to me

Further, Catherine found that when you do break through [as a minority female representative], your voice is heard.

This is the thing, but it’s hard to breakthrough, but when you do breakthrough and you are actually there. You do then have a very very powerful position because you’re one of the very small number and by God when you speak you are hard to ignore.

In sum, though at times some of the female politicians found it difficult to remain “relentless” in their pursuit of gender equality in local political chambers, much of the biases which were experienced can be attributed to, in part, the lack of a critical number of female representatives and the male dominated political system. Many of the academic studies and EU reports insist on establishing gender quotas in local legislative institutions (Buckley et al., 2015; Ceciarini, 2019; Cullen and McGing, 2019) and this imperative will be included as a recommendation in Chapter 5 of this report. Furthermore, a charter to advance gender equality “for women and men in local life” has been developed at European level, and this charter will also be referenced in the final chapter of this report and will be recommended as an instrument which should proactively be adopted by the County Council members as signatories to action gender equality initiatives (CEMR, 2006). Members are invited to sign it, to make a formal public commitment to the principle of equality of women and men, and to implement, within their territory, the commitments set out within the Charter. To assist in the implementation of these commitments, each signatory authority undertakes to draw up an Equality Action Plan, which sets out its priorities, actions and resources. In addition, each signatory

authority undertakes to engage with all of the institutions and organisations in its territory, in order to promote the achievement of real equality in practice.

Gender neutral challenges

It is also important to note that many of the battles for nomination at local level faced by female representatives are also faced by their male counterparts. Catherine described how she faced difficult, sometimes underhand and “aggressive” battles for nomination at cumann level, but that she couldn’t necessarily attribute these difficulties to a bias against her because she was a female. She believed, like Maura, that these challenges and competitive nomination processes equally affect both males and females.

Going forward, the consensus among this group was that gender quotas are needed until such a time as a critical mass of women are represented. Gender quotas “don’t have to stay forever, you know, but we need them” now.

Elements which have impact at a wider societal or structural level

There are many cultural and traditional influences on Irish society which tend to perpetuate stereotypical roles for women and collectively act as a deterrent to the uptake of non-traditional female leadership roles. Sile provides us with some compelling insights into the enduring perception about the role of the woman in Irish society, when she tells the story about the conversation she had with an elderly constituent, one evening she was canvassing for votes.

“ *I just must tell you a story before I forget. It’s on my mind. When I was canvassing for the first election as well and we went around the houses, we went to a house of a man, (this man has passed away since) and he took the leaflet and he looked at me and he looked at the leaflets. And he said ‘that’s fine’. And then he said (out loud and not in an insulting way at all), he said, ‘yes, I give you my number one vote right now’, he said. Then he said, ‘they need somebody to make the tea for them up there’ [That was up there in Mayo County Council] and he honestly didn’t say it in a way that, all you can do is make tea but, that, for example, is what I mean, when I talk about culture, um, and things that are hardest to change, it’s the peoples’ hearts and minds around that.* ”

The story recounted by Sile is an arresting read. Perhaps the reason it strikes us, is because we might have believed that this perception about the abilities and the role of the female belonged to the past. Yet it happened in 2004, which is not that long ago. It is the kind of traditional attitude to the role of the female that we might have thought, had long disappeared.

The culture of a society consists principally of the ideas, “social behaviour and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups” (Tylor, 2011) and tradition transmits these customs and beliefs from one generation to another. Culture changes slowly but it does change, and the stories told by these research participants speak of a society which is changing but “at a glacial pace”.

Maura believes there is still an unconscious cultural bias in our society against female political representatives and that “people still feel like it’s a traditionally male job”. According to one elected representative:

It is [also] visible at local community committee level also when the committee has been elected and the woman is always the secretary, they’re the ones who do all the work, and then you can see the chairperson who comes in and it’s generally a male.

Participants have been confronted with strongly held beliefs in relation to the traditional place and role of the woman in the home by both male and female constituents. Again, the recurring theme of women not supporting women emerges here, as female constituents, in particular, do not hold back in expressing their traditional views. While out canvassing Maura is struck by the attitudes of some women. Sile is often asked who is minding her children at home and she fields remarks like:

Aren't you so lucky you have a husband that will mind the children

Participants feel the perceptions held by these women are self-limiting and may inhibit or limit others who would aspire to leadership roles in community and political representation.

“God isn't he great to be allowing you out at all”

“Women of a certain age” Maura says, “feel more comfortable with a male political representative” [than a female one], this perception corresponds with Catherine's experiences. Her own family and friends thought her political career “was an unnatural one for a woman”.

When a woman is leaving behind.. and particularly, when she's leaving children behind, yes and taking off for three days during the week, and when you're supposed to be at home, and you're supposed to be baking bread and doing all the washing machine and all those jobs that are expected of you. On top of everything else, it is, it's nearly an unnatural existence and even actually not just, let's see with your own family, but amongst your friends, everybody kind of considers it a kind of a slightly unnatural existence.

Uaneen, Eileen, Catherine and Maura told of distressing experiences in relation to their appearance and personal life being publicly dissected. Several of the women have, unfortunately, had direct experiences where they themselves or other female public representatives have been subject to harsh judgement; sexist criticism and are subjected to public appraisals with a “higher moral compass” than their male counterparts. Several representatives have been subject to particularly cruel traditional and interactive social media articles, and the most highly critical articles have been written by other women. One of the recommendations of this report, presented in Chapter 5, will be to implement a mechanism to address the unjust critical and discriminatory personal attacks on public representatives.

A further point in relation to culture and tradition is that of the changes in generational family loyalty to a political party. The generational adherence to a political party is changing. Young people make up their own minds and do not necessarily toe the traditional line of the “strong party family”. According to a telling remark by Bernie:

They [the families] no longer need the patriarch of the family to make representations for their college grant to the local councillor, they are more independent, and it has become harder to get them [the younger members of the traditional party families] into a meeting.

Bernie also explained that the tradition of the men going to the party-political meetings and the men “representing the household” is changing also.

Attempting to change attitudes tied to culture and tradition is a slow process. It is critically important to address the perpetuation of traditional female stereotypes and deeply entrenched cultural behaviours which may overtly or passively aggressively discourage women from representing their own or their communities' voices. It is by relating and publicising and discussing stories like the ones presented here, that we can become conscious of our own cultural conditioning and biases and subsequently check our thinking. We have to consciously “check our biases ourselves”. To address these issues further, there are some recommendations presented in Chapter 5 to raise awareness of the endeavours of female political representatives and successful political role models.

Political lifestyle and career challenges.

Issues related to the demanding lifestyle and commitments of a political representative were the most significant recurring topic among this participant group. From the process of being nominated by the local party cumann (local branch) to becoming elected and representing the constituency and driving up and down to Dublin (a 482 km round trip from the county council offices in Castlebar, Co Mayo), all of the political participants without exception made continuous reference to the high demands of the political career.

Financial commitments

The financial commitments of a career in politics were high on the agenda and all of the participants interviewed spoke of the high personal financial costs involved in funding an election campaign and that even if you were a member of one of the larger political parties, you still might have to take out a personal loan to get posters and leaflets printed and to fund your campaign, which can be very costly.

Personal resilience required

Such a career demands high personal resilience and requires a strong and spirited character. We have seen earlier in this chapter that female politicians have faced “*particularly nasty abuse*” on social media, further examples provided of harassment by participants included men banging on the table in the constituency office and there are also the incessant constituent requests which crop up on private occasions; on Sundays; when out with family at social occasions and even while at funerals or at the supermarket doing the shopping. There is no let up and constituents do not permit representatives to have time off.

In reality, in this career you rarely have Sundays off. There are funerals; events; local and county meetings to attend and if you are a county councillor, as that is a part-time position, you still have to get up on Monday morning after very late evening meetings to do your full time job to pay the mortgage. It is a very demanding career

The consensus is that you:

Have to be very strong character as a woman to survive in politics because you know politics is tough

Maternity leave is not an option

In addition to the day to day issues experienced there are other more personal factors which can inhibit your commitment to the role of this demanding career. There are biological issues (issues such as breast feeding and childbirth) which affect only women, and which can discourage or prevent women from continuing to serve as a public representative once they have children. Though there are creche facilities widely available to female public representatives, the political lifestyle often does not lend itself to family friendly practices. One of the research participants told of how, while on the way to Dublin to represent her constituents, she:

Breastfed her child on the side of the road

The long hours and the late evenings do prevent mothers from spending time with their children. Even though there are childcare facilities provided in the house of the Oireachtas for female representatives:

It is just not a runner to have your baby in the creche from 8am morning to 12:00 o'clock at night

Moreover, despite current government initiatives to improve maternity and paternity leave for elected representatives, maternity leave is “not an option” according to two of the participants. They explain that “the people have elected you” and likening their role to that of an entrepreneur who must keep the business open to earn a living no matter what the prevailing circumstances are, they maintain you cannot leave your post for a prolonged length of time or you would lose your seat in the next election.

“ **You just wouldn't take it [maternity leave] because you'd lose your job. And that's not because the party would be doing anything untoward to you, but the general public expects you to be around. And it just isn't acceptable to be gone for six months. Yes, that's the nature of the job. and I always compare it to being self-employed. You know, if you had a shop, for example, you wouldn't close your doors for six months. Yeah, so self-employed persons are in the same position.** ”

Another story was told by about how one public representative was in hospital recovering after delivering her baby via a caesarean section and a constituent phoned her. When the caller learned that the new mother could not talk as she was just out of the operating theatre the relentless constituent said, “ah tell her to call me back this evening”. This compelling story supports the participants’ statement in relation to the difficulties getting time off:

The community who elected you expect you to be responsive to them seven days a week, they’re not electing somebody to deputize for you

Everyone owns a bit of you

Ownership is another theme that arises frequently. Participants explain that people have ownership of you, and they don’t let you go.

Everybody owns a bit of you. People think they can dictate to you and they are all in your lives.

When you become a national politician, you employ a number of local people and their livelihoods are dependent upon you returning your seat in the next election.

A lot of people are living their own dreams and ambitions through you [...] you have a big support network with a lot of people depending on you and living their lives through you and that is very hard to extricate yourself from. Let me tell you, yeah, very difficult.

According to Bernie you have always to be prepared when you leave your house, to relate to everyone, and she says that:

If you’re not able to mix with the best of them. You’re not going to survive

For these reasons, Catherine sums up the impact of the political career as:

“ A catastrophic career for family, OK, so it is, absolutely catastrophic ”

Sile’s perspective echoes Catherine’s views on the damage the political career can inflict on your personal and professional life, she believes that men can deal with the demands and conflicts of this career better than women as they seem to be able to brush them off better.

Men seem to be able to brush it off better on other as a whole, so why would any woman bother to enter such a toxic arena where you’re in the most hated profession in the world?

You really have to believe

In order to survive in this career according to the elected representatives, you really must believe in something to get you through. Sile thinks that you have to believe in a “big ideal”. You have “to be cut out for it” Bernie says and “truly if you don’t enjoy, it, you cannot do it”. Sile believes there is a lot of naivety about the work involved in becoming a female political representative.

There is so much work involved in getting the nomination at local level, and knocking on the doors canvassing then when you face issues like when you’re being excluded and decisions are already made and things are being orchestrated in all kinds of devious ways it’s difficult to rise above it, and that’s why you really have to believe. If it’s not what you want and it’s not where you want to be, and if you don’t know why you’re there, then you have no business being there and so to be successful in politics, I think you need to be very, very clear what it is you’re trying to achieve.

Cutting your teeth; doing your time and battling orchestrated attempts to block candidacy

You face a lot of opposition particularly if you haven't "cut your teeth" by doing what is expected of you as you move through the ranks. According to further research reports in the field of Irish local politics, this is a phenomenon known as localism. Localism suggests that candidates with strong constituency bases, prominent name recognition, and with experience in local representation are more likely to win election to national office (Buckley et al., 2015).

Participants in this study claim that they would have been expected to have taken a position, for example, as a local cumann secretary and to "do their time" at local level and not be "parachuted in" for a nomination by head office. For one participant this was the case and she faced fierce opposition:

They blocked me and by God they did everything in their power to block me [...] that was upsetting, but it did make me more determined then.

Others faced deliberately rescheduled party nomination meetings at a time when the female candidate was unavailable, to purposely block their candidacy, knowing that they were out of the country on holiday.

It is interesting to note that some of the local politicians had consciously decided not to go any further than county level politics as they understood that going further on into a career in national politics would be too onerous and detrimental to their work life balance.

Community representation as a source of pride

In spite of all the difficulties expressed, to be able to represent your community is a source of "great pride" according to Catherine and there are great personal rewards to be gained in representing your county and your constituency. Bernie agrees, and she adds that you meet "great people" on the journey.

However, given the considerable difficulties faced by both male and female politicians, it is no surprise that Sile should conclude that:

Maybe it's the women that are outside politics, that don't go into it are the more, the most sensible.

Conclusion of chapter four

In this chapter a significant number of issues were raised here by the political representatives in relation to factors which impact on the individual female who might aspire to a role as a political leader. Among these the most salient factor was, the fact that females tend to undersell themselves and exhibit low degrees of self-confidence. The role and impact that having an education has on the political career was referenced and more emphasis was placed by participants on the need to raise awareness about the mechanisms of accessing political parties and the nomination system.

Many participants referenced the difficulties associated with "knowing how" to get into politics. In relation to gender equality and balance, the difficulties faced by lone female voices in male dominated political representation environments were presented, as were the conflicting opinions and debates around gender quotas. Societal and cultural issues were explored, and some stories were told of prevailing cultural stereotyping of female roles in Irish society. This was seen to potentially create impediments for others who aspire to progress in leadership roles.

The final section in this chapter related to the onerous demands of the political career. Reference was made to the financial costs of going for election and the difficulties and challenges associated with juggling family life and the political career. Several recommendations have been provided by the participants which relate to the issues identified. These recommendations are presented in the next chapter, the final chapter of this report, which summarises the findings of this report and presents the conclusions and recommendations of this research study.

Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

This final chapter opens by re-stating the aim and objectives of the current project: The aim was to identify challenges or barriers experienced by women when engaging in community affairs and in the political system in County Mayo. The primary objective of the research was to document the experiences of women involved in leadership and community representation roles, in politics and community organisations in County Mayo, and to uncover any challenges which they had faced. Recommendations to address the issues which emerged from the discussions/semi-structured interviews were also to be presented in the final research report. The research questions which guided this study are presented below:

- What were the motivators for women to become involved in community affairs and/or political affairs in Mayo?
- What were the experiences of women in the course of their involvement?
- What, if any recommendations would the women make to improve participation for women in Mayo?

The answers to these questions were uncovered in conversation with the eight different groups of Mayo women and the conclusions and recommendations which are presented in this chapter were informed by these discussions. Reference is made to other relevant studies where appropriate.

Motivators and Challenges to involvement which have impact at an individual level

In response to the question about participants' motivations for involvement in community affairs and political representation in Mayo, participants agreed unanimously that they became involved by personal choice. Several participants were elected into their current or previous positions by the Mayo electoral community. Motivations for involvement varied. Main reasons cited included:

- to have a voice;
- to represent their community, organisation and/or electoral area;
- to pursue an important issue via the legislative process;
- to influence change;
- for altruistic reasons, when they had identified a deficit for a particular community service;
- because they were "always interested in people"
- to advocate for some people with special needs.

In the course of discussions regarding motivations for involvement, a series of themes emerged, which participants claimed impeded the involvement of women at a personal or individual level. Confidence and self-perception emerged as a recurrent and prominent theme.

Confidence and self-perception

A key finding in this study was the consensus around the existence of a female confidence gap. Confidence and perceptions of self prominently featured as both motivators and barriers for individual/personal involvement in community affairs or when presenting for leadership positions or engaging in political representation. While most of the participants in this study believed that they themselves were sufficiently confident, they believed that confidence and self-perception were barriers for many women to becoming involved in community affairs, as an organisational leader or a public representative. Many of the participants also believed that the choice to go forward for roles was connected to the interplay between personal perceptions of self; personal levels of self-confidence and the extent to which they believed they had a sufficient level of competency for the role.

There was general consensus across all groups that women tend to "undervalue their worth" and generally lack self-belief and the confidence to "go for it". Some participants, although they stated that they were confident in themselves, were hesitant to go forward for leadership roles even though they knew that they were at least as competent, if not more so, than their male counterparts. This concurs with research findings by the Fawcett Society (2017) within local government in the United Kingdom, which suggested that low self-confidence was cited by 44% of female councillors as being a barrier within their role, compared to 24% of male councillors (Fawcett, 2017). One of the participants stated that, over many years in different organisations, she had noticed that many

women were “shyer” than their male counterparts. Another participant commented on the attitude of some women who are involved in community affairs and who “are willing to do anything” except go forward for “top table” roles. Comments such as “don’t put me up there” are representative of a modest level of confidence which appears to be characteristic of many females, according to participants.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that women are less able to deal with confrontation than their male counterparts, as one participant already in a leadership role commented:

I’m not a confrontational person... I don’t do well if you confront me now. I’d be kind of gone. Oh my God. And I possibly wouldn’t fight back. And I just roll my eyes and say ‘whatever’.

A minority of participants expressed the view that they were proud of their own achievements and this had improved their self-perception:

It’s very important for me to go on. I feel it’s coming on (perception of herself). I’d feel proud of myself.

Similarly, many participants believed that their confidence and self-perception improved as they became more competent in their roles in community affairs. Participants in the Migrant group referenced factors outside their communities, such as discrimination and racism, which could adversely affect an individual’s level of confidence and self-perception.

Recommendations to improve confidence and self-perception

Several participants suggested different ways that women’s confidence and self-perception might be improved, and which might encourage deeper involvement in political and community representation. Many participants believed that the very act of initiating involvement empowers women, particularly if they work alongside women experienced in the roles. A mentoring initiative would be advantageous, as women who were already involved in leadership roles could actively encourage and support others. Examples shared by some of the participants, demonstrated that this was already happening. In contrast to this perspective, other participants believed that the onus was on women themselves to become involved and “put themselves out there more”, and that “what was in their own heads was preventing them”.

To address this lack of confidence, many of the participants believed that upskilling and training courses for their roles would assist greatly. An additional means of building confidence and further empowering women to actively participate, and progress in political and community representation, recommended by the participants, included becoming a member of a women’s network. Examples of effective networks given were EmpowerHer or Network Ireland, Mayo branch. A similar women’s network or support group could be established for community and political representation, according to participants.

Many of the elected representatives commented on the effort involved in getting women elected and as one political representative explained: “there is a lot of naivety around what it takes to get there”. The women who succeed in acquiring leadership roles in community representation and politics are women who, as one participant stated, possess a “shoulder to the wheel mentality”, and who are accustomed to negotiating their way through conflict and confrontation. Another participant commented that “it’s only your own fears that will keep you from (the) articulation of your views”.

According to some of the participants “you really have to be cut out for it (the leadership role)”. Another explained that to remain in this challenging role “you really have to believe” and strive towards a big ideal”. Hillary Clinton (US presidential candidate in 2016) was referenced as a role model. Clinton’s resilience and strength of character had become evident when she was put to the test and she showed her “true colours when her back was against the wall”.

Participants in the Youth group agreed that Youth organisations which encourage young people to express their views, such as Comhairle or Foroige and the *Leadership for Life Programme*, are excellent forums to develop leadership skills. These programmes for young people encourage them to stand up and have their voices heard.

Several participants recommended that young girls should be supported to build their confidence and should be helped “to define their inner power from an early age”. Debating and public speaking skills were also highlighted as a beneficial testing ground for negotiating in life and some participants believed that they should be prioritised in secondary schools and become a key objective of the secondary school system.

Summary of recommendations to improve confidence and self-perception

1. It is recommended that girls be, from a young age, exposed to politics and community representation via engagement with political role models and mentors; open engagement with the election process and the party system and via political orientation visits to government buildings.
2. The continued support and development of youth organisations is critical. These organisations provide youth leadership programmes and opportunities to debate and listen to and represent opinions at national youth forums. These activities are crucial for building the confidence of young female representatives.
3. To build confidence, it is important to highlight the achievements of female politicians and successful female role models, via an ongoing series of presentations or mini conferences in the county.
4. It is important to encourage female community group representatives to join empowering female network groups such as “Network Mayo” and “Going for Growth”, to build personal networks and develop personal confidence levels.

Education as a motivator and a barrier to individual female involvement

The topic of education emerged as another prominent theme in this research, both as a motivator and as a barrier. The majority of the references to the need for education emerged from discussions with the minority representative groups in this study. These groups placed great value on education and believed that it was “the way forward” for their community. The variation in the focus placed on education by the different groups was striking. This was, in itself, an interesting finding.

Many participants appeared to take education for granted and their expectations included a third level education. Others who chose to leave school early, for various reasons, hugely appreciated the opportunity to access adult education and stated their intentions to avail of “every opportunity for education courses and training” that is offered. Some participants in the minority groups commented that they had attained an extremely high level of educational achievement. Others highlighted the difficulties they had in accessing education courses, because of transport difficulties to and from their rural locations and the costs associated with hiring private transport. The lack of proficiency in the English language was a major barrier to involvement, and as one participant explained, it prevented her engaging with any local community organisation, outside her own Migrant community group. An extra barrier for the women accessing education in this research, also particularly associated with the Migrant community, was the lack of childcare support. This finding in relation to childcare concurs with those of Lima (2020) who suggested that the lack of a social network and support system for the Migrant community was a barrier to their involvement in affairs outside the home.

One of the participants in the Migrant representative group expressed disappointment that many of the courses which were available to her community had to do with “caring roles” and she expressed the view that this was not an area she had any interest in. However, the constraints outlined above, mostly regarding lack of childcare and transport difficulties prevented her involvement in other courses of her choice.

The Irish voting system presented difficulties for some as it was difficult to understand. Members of the Migrant group had had attended helpful classes on the election process. The classes had given them insights into the Single Transferrable Voting System (STV) operating at all elections in Ireland.

Possibly in line with that of society in general, findings in this research highlight the varying levels of access to education between some participants and others. If equality of opportunity is to exist, this gap must be bridged. Particular focus on access to education is needed for certain minority groups. The barriers they identified which were associated with language, childcare and transport must be considered.

Interestingly, three of the politicians interviewed explained that, though they strongly espoused the value of education in terms of self-development and confidence, and agreed that it definitely improved access to career options and various positions in society, they were of the view that politics “is the one career where actually you will need no [third level] qualifications whatsoever”.

“We are not exposing women to politics early enough” and empowering children from a young age was a recurring theme. Several political representatives suggested that young women need to be taken to Cumann (branch) meetings and expose them to “the count” and the processes involved in canvassing and understanding the political system in practice; “That way it [leading as a woman] becomes more visible and therefore becomes possible”.

Within the County of Mayo, there is a wealth of political experience. There appears to be a gap in the market for the provision of high-level coaching skills and media training for the development of political representatives in the county. Ideally, all the political parties, local committees and organisations would support such an initiative

in the interest of fostering equal representation and boosting the current low representation of women in Mayo County Council and beyond. This report recommends the development of a high-level coaching summer school or mentoring system for either one to one or group development of political aspirants. *DemocraShe*, established in 2000, is one such cross-party initiative in Northern Ireland which led to successful programmes such as the Young Female Leaders Academy (Maguire, 2018). Another is the non-profit organisation *Women for Election*, currently provided in Dublin. While there does not appear to be a formal evaluation of those programmes, they bring benefits to aspiring politicians.

Summary of recommendations to bridge educational gaps

1. Continued provision for the essential and basic needs of language support; childcare support and training initiatives for Migrant groups is recommended, in order to bridge the educational gap between these groups and mainstream society, to provide these groups with the necessary attributes for political and community representation.
2. The provision of access (for all society groups) to educational programmes of their choosing is critical.
3. The value of informal educational initiatives should not be underestimated. The provision of targeted training in topics such as voting processes are invaluable, in particular for new entrants to the country.
4. A series of high-level coaching initiatives leveraging the extensive political expertise across the county targeting aspiring female community and political representatives may incentivise and enable potential political candidates.

Factors which have impact at representative group level

Factors which emerged as having impact at the level of the representative group included: Challenges within male dominated environments and gender related biases; the benefits and associated difficulties of quotas; challenges accessing leadership appointments; experiences of undesirable sexist commentaries; and questionable informal decision-making practices.

Local politics in Mayo is male dominated. In the Political grouping, participants frequently commented on their experience of being the only female voice in an environment which was “very, very male dominated”. The views of the elected representatives were unanimous when they referred to how difficult it was for a woman to emerge in this environment. The political representatives in this study said that even though they knew themselves as very capable, they believed that they had to work twice as hard [as the men], to get a nomination. However, it was interesting to note that not all experiences of accessing political roles were negative. One participant spoke of an encouraging experience she had had. She was backed by her party colleagues to run for election and she had always felt, as she progressed through the ranks, as if she “was pushing an open door”.

In the other participant groupings, several of the participants commented on the difficulties encountered when going for leadership roles. Some were encouraged to go for supportive roles, rather than leadership roles in different organisations. This concurs with research conducted by Buckley (2013), who found that across party politics, a higher percentage of women were in supportive roles, such as secretary and treasurer, compared to men who mostly held leadership roles, such as that of chairperson.

Perhaps one of the contributing factors might be, according to participants, that decisions are often made outside the governing structures and they suggested this practice favoured men, who appeared to be better at networking. Further, political cumann (local branch) decision making processes, did not always appear for example, to engage in transparent top-table selection and nomination practices. Important decisions, according to participants, are frequently taken outside the governing structures of many community groups, clubs and organisations. The practice of seeking support outside the structure of meetings, at local committee and organisational level, is reminiscent of the informal institution of ‘localism’ described as being part of potential candidates’ recruitment and nomination for politics (Culhane, 2017).

Gender biases featured strongly in discussions. On occasion, gender bias worked in favour of female appointment to a role. Some participants suggested they might have been appointed to their roles as the “Token Woman”, and that perhaps insufficient prior consideration had been given to the positive contributions that they would bring to the organisation. This rationale for appointments did not sit comfortably with participants who were consistent in their view that the most competent person should get the job. However, they did agree that the female quota system was necessary to achieve that critical representative number of women in political circles.

For the most part, gender bias had a negative impact on the participants from all of the representative groups in this research. Of particular concern were the discussions related to participants being subjected to comments of a sexual nature. These commentaries arose among those involved in community affairs, rather than from the elected representatives. One participant referred to “comments flying around the table”. Another was subjected to comments over the phone, which “definitely would not have been said to a man”. Another participant stated that she perhaps was taking herself too seriously and blamed her discomfort at the comment (the exact nature of which was not divulged), on her lack of understanding of the Irish sense of humour, as she was from another culture. It is critical that a mechanism is put in place to impede such discriminatory commentaries. A number of recommendations were developed to address these issues.

Recommendations addressing gender disparity and governance issues at representative group level

There were several recommendations made by participants in relation to governance and gender balance. Many organisations at community level and at county level have structures which have been in place, and roles which have been filled, on the executive committee for excessively long periods of time. Community representatives in this study agreed that tenure should be limited and suggested that it was important to have new voices coming through at community level from different backgrounds and representing gender balance and community diversity.

In political circles, it was suggested that the persistent male domination of committees be addressed by the members themselves, by members of all genders. Political parties, according to participants, need to look inside their own organisations and actively encourage newcomers from all sections of society. The legislative gender quota, introduced in 2012, placed an obligation on political parties to have a minimum of 30% female candidates in the following general election, with a view to improving gender equality at national level and filtering down to local level (Buckley et al., 2014). However, there is no such gender quota at local level politics (Buckley et al., 2015). To achieve gender parity, quotas should be present at local level.

When it comes down to inviting women to participate in these organisations, it is the view of some participants that it is an insult to consider women for the role because of their gender, rather than because they may be the most competent person for the position. Women should not be classified as a “homogenous bunch”.

“ What we need to do is, not treat women as a homogenous bunch, Just because we’re women. We need to look out for the needs of Traveller women; women who are parenting alone; women who are on low incomes; women who experience domestic violence, women who’ve experienced different mental health difficulties. All of those experiences we are missing out on. It’s not just about having women at the top or women in decision-making. It’s about the journey those women have come through to get to where they are. ”

Like their male counterparts, representatives in political and community circles should come from all walks of society and represent the diverse communities that make up our society. Diversity in representation should be encouraged and stereotyping practices avoided. Further, “orchestrated” informal decision-making processes should be actively discouraged, according to several participants, in order to improve and develop organisational trust and encourage new members to join and to engage fully with the community or political group.

In addition, significant effort should be made to address comments or innuendos of a sexual nature which were experienced by some people across the different groups. Leadership with progressive values was required and systems should be put in place within organisations to deal with offensive or inappropriate remarks, and as one participant stated: “that has to be squashed out from very early on”.

Summary of recommendations to enhance governance and gender parity at representative group level

1. It is recommended that Mayo County Council become a signatory of the ‘European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life (CEMR, 2006) Members are invited to sign it, to make a formal public commitment to the principle of equality of women and men, and to implement, within their territory, the commitments set out within the Charter. To assist in the implementation of these commitments, each signatory authority undertakes to draw up an Equality Action Plan, which sets out its priorities, actions and resources to this end. In addition, each signatory authority undertakes to engage with all of the institutions and organisations in its territory, in order to promote the achievement of real equality in practice.

2. The implementation of strict codes of practice and sanctions in organisations is highly recommended, so that gender related comments and offensive and inappropriate remarks “be squashed out”.
3. It is recommended that, as a mark of best practice, the “top table” of community organisations be rotated periodically having regard to equality and diversity of representation.
4. It is recommended that rural political and community group organisations consider the schedules of their meetings to allow for family friendly meeting times. In addition, they should consider that the role of the local councillor role is a part-time one, and that most councillors have a full-time position to discharge, in order to meet their personal financial obligations.
5. All available support and encouragement should be provided for female members of the minority community groups who express an interest in becoming involved in community affairs and in the broader political system, as this research highlights that female members of those communities are faced with extra barriers, compared to the general population.

Factors which have impact at the level of society: culture and tradition

As referenced in previous chapters, strongly held beliefs persist in relation to the traditional place and role of the woman in Irish society, according to the participants across all the representative groups in this research. Many of these are cultural biases which are transmitted across generations and instilled from childhood. Some examples of how society perpetuates female gender myths were provided by participants:

It's more a multi systemic thing the way that society is set up. Women [on the one hand] we are expecting women to be like, um, goddesses, and on the other hand to be our Blessed Lady or Queen of the May.

The same participant commented that [a leader]:

doesn't have to be that charismatic, highly assertive and confident person. Maybe we should be consciously celebrating a kind of leadership that is more empathetic and is more intuitively competent.

It is not surprising (given the perpetuated gender stereotyping), that unconscious cultural bias persists in our society against female political representatives: “people still feel like it’s a traditionally male job”. The persistent stereotyping of traditional female role models was illustrated in Chapter Three by the two stories presented by female politicians. One story was told about the local male constituent who would give the political nominee his “number one” vote so she could “make the tea” in Mayo County Council, and the other story was told about how a political representative’s career was perceived by her family and friends as “unnatural to a woman”. These stories reflect the attitude towards women of many people in society, according to some research participants. Of note in particular is the attitude females in general adopt with other female leaders. Women appear to put restrictions on each other to conform to traditional roles:

Women restrict women from getting ahead; women won't support women; girls judge other girls.

In fact, some participants stated that there appears to be a culture of harsh judgement and “higher moral standards” expected by the general public, especially from the political representatives.

Reference was made by some participants to gender role assignment in the governance of many community organisations, in which the chairpersons are predominately male. Some participants believed that this had “more to do with tradition, and that mould not yet being broken”. Participants attribute the preservation of these traditionally held beliefs to “the way they [Irish people] were reared” or brought up:

There are a few fellows like that in head office. It's just an attitude, that they think, well, I'm right and you're wrong...just because I'm a man (and you're a woman) I think it's from the way they were reared.

In order to live up to their “baking bread” role and discharge the duties of a full-time employment position and be there for the family, a “lot of the younger women today, they are run ragged with work”. They find themselves “taking kids to rugby, to athletics, to swimming, to whatever and they don’t have the time” to get involved in further community representation roles. According to participants, duties and responsibilities of the family and the household are, for the most part, assumed by women as some “women don’t believe the men should be sweeping the floor”. Further, Traveller women who got involved in community roles were going against the societal and cultural norms of their

community. The female research participants from this community are leaders in their ethnic community in that they are the people who have become “a voice for their community”, however according to them, the man is seen as “the head of the household” in the Traveller community.

It was evident from the findings that as well as deeply imbedded cultural and traditional views of a women’s role in society, some participants from minority community groups were concerned about the widespread discrimination and racism against their communities which contributed to low representation, especially of women, in community affairs and in broader politics. Overt racism was experienced by some participants from the Migrant community, and others were subjected to less obvious structural racism, and stereotyping of their community.

Change is happening, albeit slowly. In the Traveller community “men do a lot more (household chores and childcare) that they would have done years ago”, and some appeared to embrace change:

Yeah, I’d be very into change now and pushing the children to go forward into education and pushing my husband...that it’s not a woman’s job to be cleaning the house, you know...equally.

However, not all were as optimistic, as some believed that cultural and traditional views of women’s roles were deeply embedded in society and would take a lot to change. Cultural change happens slowly, from one generation to the next “we need to educate the young girls about a balance at home”. However, effective change initiation must begin in parallel “at the top”, at a national policy level, as well as inside Irish households at the level of the family. The consensus was that education in school and at home would progress change most effectively.

In school we need to help people understand the notable things done by women. Also, we should learn in school how, if you want to be the first female Taoiseach, how to go about that.

Having strong role models to look up to like “Mary McAleese and Mary Robinson” is critical to break the moulds set by tradition. Further, political research participants suggested bringing younger people “out canvassing” and up to “the count” to see how the political process and democracy works, would encourage them to get involved. Role models and women in strong positions can “bring other women along”.

To integrate minority communities and combat discrimination, we must find ways to trust and respect each other and acknowledge diversity, according to one Traveller participant. Stronger laws, she believed, were required to deal with discrimination. Cross-community education about customs and traditions would enable trust-building. The Migrant community group had similar views, they believed that the wider community, needs to embrace asylum seekers, stop labelling and racism and change their attitude towards them.

Summary of recommendations addressing the challenges of culture and tradition

1. Practical interaction with strong female leaders and role models should be encouraged with specific focuses. Women in leadership roles should be encouraged to act as mentors to actively bring other women along.
2. An ongoing series of documentaries or short stories should be redacted and publicised about “notable achievements of Mayo women or women of the West of Ireland”, to encourage and celebrate a kind of leadership that is more empathetic and are more intuitively competent.
3. A series of interactive workshops should be held around the question of female leadership inside our different cultural communities (what a female leader looks like inside each community).
4. Promote gender equality from a young age, both at home and at school to have a healthier society and enhance female political representation in the future.
5. Promote workshops where Traveller and Migrant communities and the broader population may share their respective traditions and cultures to increase trust, respect, understanding and acceptance of diversity and inclusivity. A recent video on the craft of paper flower making, created during Traveller Pride Week, is one example of what can be done (MTSG, 2020).

Factors which have impact on the career and lifestyle of the politician

The long hours and the onerous workload of the political representative was a theme which resonated strongly with the political representatives. Many of the participants from the other groupings also referenced the difficult lifestyle and excessively high expectations the electorate have of their public representatives.

The dual mandate of the Teachta Dála (TD) (member of the Dáil), means that the representative holds a position in the national house of the Oireachtas and concurrently attends to duties in her local constituency, this represents a high volume workload, according to participants. The distance from the local constituency in Mayo to the houses of the Oireachtas in Dublin also makes life difficult for the Mayo politicians, as it forces them to be away from their family homes for an average of three to four days a week, which can be highly detrimental or in the words of one participant, “catastrophic” to family life.

The financial sums which must be invested from personal finances and the resilience required for the electioneering process is often underestimated, as are the fierce challenges which are met from opposing candidates, both from within and from outside the political party.

The timing of political meetings, and the “always on” demands from the electorate of their local, county or national representative, makes for little downtime and an unhealthy work-life balance. These gender-neutral issues, when coupled with the biological and emotional demands of motherhood make for an arduous decision-making process when the opportunity arises to contest a seat or represent your constituency at a county or national level. Though there are moves to improve the maternity leave conditions for public representatives, there are additional pressing issues which must be considered in relation to the mandate the constituency has given to the individual. The female politicians interviewed believe that, in their positions it is very difficult to take maternity leave, given the commitment they have given to their constituents and the traditional perception of the public representative being always available. In addition, the female political representative faces the regular and somewhat “daunting prospect” of standing up in a chamber occupied principally by male members of the political population and speaking out as part of a small minority of females. Out of the 160 seats in the Dáil, 36 women (22.5%) were elected in the 2020 General Election. (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2020).

Yet, the consensus among the elected representatives was that the career of the political representative is a rewarding one. The following recommendations aim to address several challenges raised under this theme.

Summary of recommendations to address the highlighted challenges of the political career

1. Consider the standardisation of meeting times and incorporation of the right to work/life balance for councillors and politicians. Educate the electorate to consider the timing of the demands they put on community and political representatives.
2. To address the cost of election campaigning for female candidates, it is suggested that a philanthropic fund be established.
3. To address the geographic distance to be travelled from Mayo to Dublin it is suggested that online technologies be facilitated for regular meetings and that meeting locations are rotated periodically to avoid repetitive long trips to Dublin.
4. The quota system should remain, and it is recommended that pressure be put on the Irish government to activate gender quotas at County Council level.

If you actually [could] think, well, you know that I have a reasonable chance here of getting through and succeeding. Then I think more women will be trying to throw their hats into the ring. So, for an initial period, yes, I would. I would look at the whole issue, of quotas.

Concluding remarks

The importance of a having a balance of perspectives

Women bring empathy, really strong empathy with people who might, who might be struggling, you know, in terms of poverty and inequality, you know, older people, children. I just think we bring a much broader experience. You know, we have hands-on experience and we can empathise easily with people in different situations ... really. You know there's so many women, nurses, carers looking after children. We know what the issues are ... and I think at local politics in particular, sometimes it's small, practical measures. It's not the big monies. Sometimes it doesn't even cost. Yes, it's small things that make a difference

Emotional intelligence is a key attribute of the female contribution to decision-making discussions. Women “bring a different approach to solving problems” and they “think before they act”. Practical, people-focused issues are often raised by female political representatives when they get that nomination and sit at the legislative table as a local or national representative. Some examples of the many people-focused issues brought “to the table” by women elected as representatives in Mayo include: the provision of children’s playgrounds and recreational areas; the allocation of pedestrian crossings at crucial hospital entrances and town-centre locations; the provision of footpaths fit for the elderly and wheelchair access to public amenities. In addition to raising many wider societal issues of concern to citizens, women bring warmth of feeling and empathy “to the top table” that often is missing in clinically focused political discussions. Men, according to participants in this research, have a different, perhaps more task-orientated way of approaching concerns.

However, the real benefits accrue when there is a balance of perspectives around the table, and both men and women are equally represented in decision-making processes.

“ Politics is all about solving problems and where you have a balance of male and female perspectives, you find better outcomes in terms of those solutions. So, you have more rounded solutions, that is not to say that the male is better than female or that the female is better than the male. It's the combination that offers perspectives and that makes the outcome better for every problem that is solved in government, and there is no doubt about that. ”

Space to develop new steps of change and make a difference

Community and political leaders who participated in this study became involved in their roles because they felt they could “make a difference”. The simplicity of this ambition contrasts sharply with the power broking objectives that frequently prevail during higher-level decision-making processes and debates, when candidates are positioning themselves; vying for nomination or battling for a seat in a constituency. Women will become involved in community and political leadership if they feel they are going to be able to make a real difference to people’s lives. Power and control for their own sake were not referenced once, in this report as motivating factors by any of the participants. This altruistic objective to work for the betterment of their community is echoed by some of the most influential female role models in the world. Mary Robinson’s mission to pursue “equality and equity” for the weak, resonates with Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s desire to “help repair tears in her society”. As she reflected on her life’s work and on her own contribution to governance in the United States, Ginsburg explained that she would like to be remembered as:

Someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability. And to help repair tears in her society, to make things a little better through the use of whatever ability she has.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Carmon, 2015)

While several of the females who lent their voices to this research study did not express an interest in taking the next step on the journey from their rural roots in Mayo at community level, others were keen to put themselves forward for county or national roles, so that they could make a difference to their communities. This study has documented the challenges these women may encounter on their leadership journeys. Recommendations to address these challenges have also been outlined. If these recommendations are actioned and the suggested support mechanisms are put in place, then perhaps some of these highly capable women who are working hard at community level will use, in Ginsburg's words, "the talent they have" to represent their community, where national legislative decision-making is taking place, "to make things a bit better" (Carmon, 2015).

This study into the challenges which face women accessing community leadership roles or political representation roles, will close with an inspirational emancipatory verse from the late African American poet and philosopher Maya Angelou (1993). Angelou's final words which offer us "space to place new steps of change" are dedicated to all those women who are in the process of carving out their leadership journey, from the rural roots of community representation. These final words are also dedicated, in particular, to those women who are currently providing a voice for their community in these troubling times.

*The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out upon me, the
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.
Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope
Good morning.*

"On the Pulse of Morning" by Maya Angelou (Presidential Libraries, 1993)

Appendix 1 Research Design

Research Design

Proposed working title (based on feedback from working group):

Emancipatory research into identifying barriers experienced by women when engaging in the political system at community level and beyond: women's perceptions and reality in County Mayo.

Introduction

This research has been commissioned by the Mayo County Council with a view to using an emancipatory process to identify the barriers experienced by women in Mayo when engaging in the political system and to provide recommendations based on the issues identified. Key terms are defined at the outset. This brief outline of the research design explains the research context, rationale for the study, the aims and objectives of the research. It includes a short description of the research methodology. The outlined objectives and methodology of the research incorporate recommendations from the Working Group (WG) in line with an emancipatory paradigm.

Defining key terms

Definition of "politics" and "political system"

We define politics "in the broad sense" as: the activities associated with the governance of a country or area. This involves making decisions that apply to groups of members and achieving and exercising positions of governance or organized influence over a human community. A preference for this definition also aligns with the suggestion of a member of the working group who was "more interested in politics in the broader sense". Being involved in the political system relates to the competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership (Merriam-Webster, 2020).

Research context

This study will attempt to identify barriers experienced by women in the current climate in the geographical location in Co. Mayo. In her book: *Madam Politician: The Women at the Table of Irish Political Power*, Martina Fitzgerald (2018) claims that "The trailblazing women who breached the male-dominated world of Irish politics encountered sexism and prejudice – from both sexes". This is one quotation which relates to the wider context which frames this research.

Rationale for the research

Discussion and feedback from the WG suggest that female representatives are in the minority in the political system, especially in County Mayo. One example provided by a member of the working group is that there were just two women elected to Mayo Council in 2019, this is out of 30 sitting councillors on Mayo County Council (Mayo County Council, 2020).

Research aims and objectives

Following consultation with the working group, the focus and scope of this study was refined to concentrate on capturing representative voices and experiences of the women of Mayo from specific groupings, who have been involved or have an interest in becoming involved, in local or national politics and /or positions of community influence. The research team acknowledge that there may be varying views from different groups in society and from participants within each group identified. The aims and objectives of the research are:

To capture representative voices and experiences of the women of Mayo from specific groupings, who have been involved or have an interest in being involved in local or national politics and /or positions of community influence employing a qualitative design research within an emancipatory paradigm.

To make recommendations to address issues elucidated in findings from the project. Findings and recommendations will be presented in written form, to the working group to address the remit, with a view to influencing policy related to barriers experienced by women in the political system.

Philosophical underpinnings

The researchers will employ the emancipatory research paradigm to proceed as agreed with the WG. In this regard, the researchers agree with the suggestion by Daniela and Woodhams that research, related to disadvantage and equality, cannot be conducted in isolation from the people directly affected (2007). Within this paradigm, participants in the research should be involved in shaping and directing the research process.

The core principles of "openness, participation and accountability" are key to this research methodology (Barnes, 1992:121) as are

the principles of “empowerment and reciprocity” (Oliver, 1993:36). Active participation by participants in the research process is seen as a transformative experience in itself, acting as a form of consciousness raising and is therefore, potentially emancipatory (Danieli, A., Woodhams, 2007).

The intention in this study is to explore the research question in depth and critically, through the perceptions of participants in diverse groups in County Mayo.

Research Approach

A qualitative case study approach is the most suitable design, in order to serve the aims and objectives in the current investigation. A case study “is defined solely in terms of its concentration on the specific case, in its context” (Robson, 1993, 149). A case study design was chosen in preference to phenomenology, because a “hallmark of a good qualitative case study is that it presents *in-depth understanding of the case*” (Creswell, 2013, 98), which will be necessary when exploring women’s experiences when engaging with the political system. Although the case study approach is employed generally within a deductive research paradigm, it will be used in this study to aggregate the data and complement an inductive approach, where data is gathered first and the findings grounded in the data, then lead to conclusions developed from the data.

Methods

The methods must fit in with the main research question and are chosen in line with the qualitative approach guided by the emancipatory paradigm of this research. It is acknowledged by the research team and the WG that the current social-distancing restrictions related to Covid-19 will also have an impact on the methods employed to gather data. It was expected that data would be gathered through face to face dialogue in focus groups with participants. Given the current Covid-19 social-distancing restraints, the original plan proposed by the WG to capture research data via live face-to-face focus groups is not possible.

The research team propose to conduct the focus groups virtually, where possible. If technology is a barrier to this method, we will explore the reasons why it poses a barrier and then offer the opportunity to engage in a phone call to representatives of that grouping. Thus, in the event of lack of access to virtual communication facilities, there will be individual (or where possible, group) interviews conducted over the phone, employing traditional phone lines or applications.

It is recognised by the team, that access to adequate broadband capacity in the County of Mayo is a real issue for connecting live to focus groups. This lack of access, if experienced during the conduct of this research, will be considered and built into the research as an important variable which might constitute another challenge to political or community engagement for participants.

Technology Instrumentation

Zoom or Skype virtual software; recording capacity; WhatsApp and traditional phone calls will be employed to gather research data.

Sampling strategy

The aim is to facilitate 8 x 3 female discussion groups (mindful of diversity) online via zoom = approximately 24 people. It is emphasised that numbers may vary from the original plan, given the emancipatory nature of the research.

The participants will be comprised of women who live in Mayo from eight specific groupings, who have been involved or have an interest in being involved in local or national politics and /or positions of community influence. The groups for inclusion were proposed by the working group as they are assumed to be broadly representative of a diverse group of women in Mayo. The proposed groups are: The Traveller community; The County Council; Sporting groups; Migrant groups; The Chamber of Commerce; Farm representation; Youth representatives (Comhairle na nÓg) and women already in the political system. The sampling strategy to be chosen is in line with the qualitative approach and emancipatory research. The objective of this is to elucidate the perspectives and experiences of those who have or might be experiencing barriers, within the relevant layer of influence in the County of Mayo.

Criteria for inclusion in the target sample

The interviewee must be female and must be involved or have a desire to become involved in the political system. The interviewee must be part of one of the eight selected groupings and must be living in Mayo and/or representing the County of Mayo in the political system. Ideally, three representatives from each grouping will be sought. However, it is envisaged that the exact number of representatives from each grouping will differ and will evolve, in line with the emancipatory research paradigm for this research.

Pilot Study

The reason for doing a pilot study is to test the research process.

The researchers will start with interviews of volunteer individuals on the WG: to test questions; generate rationale and capture their experiences of barriers (County Council grouping), and to explore whether there might be different interpretations by different people of the same question.

The researchers will analyse results from the pilot and following this will commence the main research project.

Ethics

Ethical consideration will permeate every stage of the research process. The research team commit to adhere to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Irish Research Council (IRC) ethical principles of social science research. In this regard, conscious of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and data protection mechanisms, the researchers will undertake to anonymise and safeguard all data collected. Unless specific permission from the WG is provided, data will be collected and employed for the purposes of this research study only. Due consideration and respect will be given to participants in this research, in line with BERA and IRC principles. Participants will be informed of the purposes and aim of this research and will be provided with the option to disengage from the interview or focus group at any time in the process if they wish.

This research will be conducted in line with the emancipatory frame, which acknowledges that participants shape the direction of the research. Focus groups and interviews will be conducted respectfully, and a dialectical approach will be employed ensuring that all voices are invited to be heard and will be reported accurately.

Timeline

The research team will adhere to the amended timeline agreed with the WG. Due to COVID19 restrictions, some challenges may arise which might impact on deadlines, but the team will undertake to communicate these immediately to WG and inform of any incumbent delays, agreeing contingencies with the WG.

Sample of main research questions

RQ1. Is there something happening at the grassroots that causes women not to progress through the system and advance their careers?

RQ2. Are there different layers/kinds of barriers applicable to different communities / sections of society?

Please note that the research questions will evolve during the process, in line with the emancipatory research frame.

		Name	Contact Details
Representative Groups	The Public Sector		
	Traveller community		
	Sporting groups		
	Migrant groups		
	Business community		
	Farming community		
	Women in the political system		
		Youth grouping	

Appendix 2 Emancipatory research principles

The researchers conducting this study acknowledge and espouse the emancipatory principles outlined as core principles driving the methodology for this project, to identify the barriers and challenges preventing women from engaging in the political system.

The researchers adhere to these principles (outlined below) in the methodology design, analysis and reporting of this project. We acknowledge that research on disadvantage and equality can “no longer be carried out in isolation” from affected people themselves (Danieli, A., Woodhams, 2007). It is recommended in emancipatory research, that the people who use services, have control of the research process.

This was taken into consideration during the research process, and strategies were put in place to ensure that this research on equality of access to the political system provided an accurate and productive account within the timeframe. The researchers and the Mayo County Council working group believe that this can only be done by ensuring that the experience of inequality was fed into the project by those who feel disadvantaged themselves (Oliver, 1993) and those who are also involved in and have influence within the political system. At all stages in the design and execution of this project: planning, design, fieldwork, analysis and report writing, the core emancipatory principles were adhered to.

The researchers want to ensure that all voices in this section of this report are heard equally and without any potential unconscious bias. Therefore, all the quotes in this section and all reference to participants and participant groups will be anonymised to a greater extent than the earlier part of this report, and the reason for this is, to ensure that participants views are heard and absorbed without reference to origin, sector or background. All views are heard with equal weighting, whether the viewpoints originate in the political community; the migrant community; the youth or the Traveller community here. Here all voices are taken on board without bias.

Though it is highly likely that some of the words will identify the origins and backgrounds of some of the participants, this is not necessarily unwelcome, as the eclectic mix of this community of women in Mayo represents the wealth and richness of the contributions.

Core principles of emancipatory research driving project design

The following is an explanation of the principles of emancipatory research which were adhered to by the researchers when conducting research in this project:

Stone and Priestley’s (Stone, E. Priestley, 1996) emancipatory research explanation is widely cited and espoused by inequality researchers (Bennett, 2002; Danieli, A., Woodhams, 2007; Kitchen, 2000; Stone, E. Priestley, 1996). They refer to the following tenets of emancipatory research as:

- the surrender of falsely premised claims to objectivity through overt political commitment to the struggles of particular groups for self-emancipation;
- the ability to give voice to the personal while endeavouring to collectivise the commonality of disabling experiences and barriers;
- the willingness to adopt a plurality of methods for data collection and analysis in response to the changing needs of particular groups
- the willingness only to undertake research where it will be of some practical benefit to the self-empowerment of people and/or the removal of specific barriers; and
- the devolution of control over research production to ensure full accountability to particular groups and their organisations;

The core principles of “openness, participation and accountability” are key to this research methodology (Barnes, 1992) as are the principles of “empowerment and reciprocity” (Oliver, 1993:36). Active participation by participants in the research process is seen as a transformative experience in itself, acting as a form of consciousness raising and is therefore, potentially emancipatory (Danieli, A., Woodhams, 2007).

Appendix 3. Interview guidelines and consent forms

Date: 16/04/20

Information for potential research participant

A chara,

We, as independent researchers, are inviting you to participate in a current research project. The research has been commissioned by Mayo County Council. We wish to outline what this research entails.

In the research, we will look at **the positioning of women in community affairs and in the political system in Mayo**. We hope to interview participants using online focus groups or interviews, either individually or in small groups, as face-to-face interviews are not possible at this time under government restrictions associated with Covid-19.

While the research has been commissioned by Mayo County Council no organisations or institutions will be given access to any of the raw data or information provided by individual research contributors. "Raw data" refers to your name, contact details and personal communication and any information gleaned through the study process will not be shared with any person nor will any person have access to this information. Everything you say will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. With your permission the interviews will be digitally recorded and will be deleted as soon as we have written up the notes of the interview. In transcribing the interview your name will not be identified. You or the researchers will choose a pseudonym at the start of the interview process. Your quotes will be anonymous.

Information will be securely stored, encrypted on IT hardware and protected with the highest quality software. Once the research data has been collated and documented, all digital files will be completely erased, and any related documents will be shredded. Your rights and our responsibilities are enshrined in the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), 2018.

The criteria for a participant to partake in the research is that the interviewee must be female and must be involved or have a desire to become involved in community representation and/ or the political system. The interviewee must be part of one of the eight selected groupings and must be living in Mayo and/or representing the County of Mayo in the political system.

If you have any queries about the study you can contact us at one of the telephone numbers or emails below, where we will be happy to answer any questions you might have. Thank you for taking the time to read this and to consider taking part in the research. We look forward to linking with you in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Mary and Janine

Dr. Janine Mc Ginn,

Email: Janine.mcginn@gmit.ie

Dr. Mary F. O' Connor Email: info@brainandbehaviour.ie

Agreement to Participate in Research Project regarding the Positioning of Women in Community Affairs and in the Political System in Mayo.

Agreement to Participate in Research Project regarding the Positioning of Women in Community Affairs and in the Political System in Mayo.

Please select your responses below

1. I understand the nature and purpose of this research.
Yes No
2. I have received enough information to make an informed decision about participating.
Yes No
3. I understand that I can raise questions about and suggest improvements to the project.
Yes No
4. I understand that I can decide not to participate in this project at any time after agreeing to it.
Yes No
5. I agree to contributing to this research.
Yes No
6. I agree to the researcher transcribing and recording interviews.
Yes No
7. I endeavour to be honest, responsive and forthcoming in my contribution to this research.
Yes No

Please select your preference below

I would like to be identified in this research by:

- my real name
- false name of researcher's choice
- false name of my own choice
- Decision may be made when I meet researcher/s

8. I would like to be involved in this project:

- just for the research interview and prefer not to be contacted again
- for interview and for follow up discussion with the researcher/s if required

9. Please indicate the age bracket you are in:

- <18
- 19 to 30
- 31 to 45
- 46 to 60
- 61 +

Please indicate briefly your involvement in community representation or political representation (this will be anonymised), including any affiliation to a political party.

Your signature/ verbal consent indicates that you have decided to take part in this project having considered the information provided

Signature: _____ Date_____

(or) Verbal consent by: _____ Date_____

Signature of witness to verbal consent: _____ Date_____

Tel. Email:

Appendix 4. Illustrating the analytical process and derivation of overarching themes.

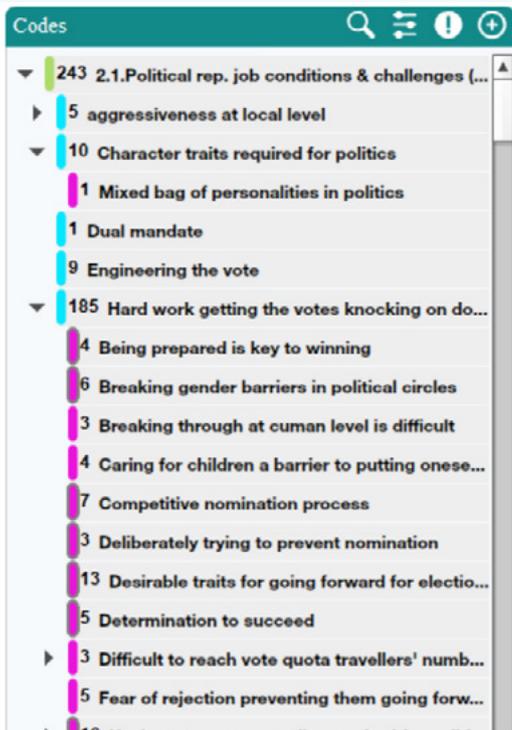
This section shows how the themes from the transcribed interviews were categorised and collected under theme or code names such as: 2.1 Political rep. (representation) job conditions and challenges, seen in screenshot 1. These codes are held securely in a formal subscription-only research database. Behind these codes are the verbatim quotes from the participants. Screenshot 1 illustrates the codes which emerged from participants words and described experiences.



Screenshot 1 showing the parent (overarching) codes categorising the data.

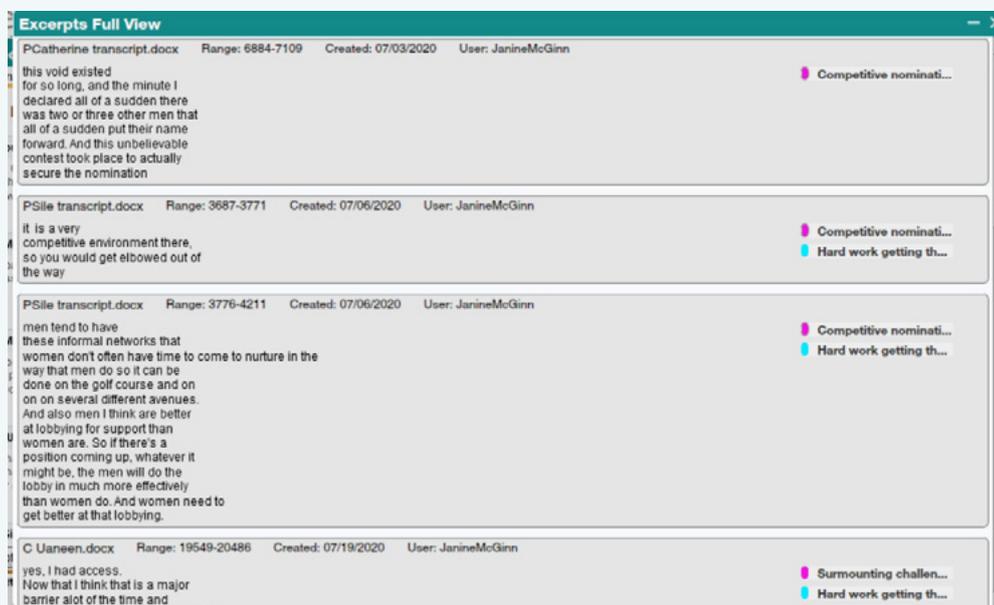
In the screenshot above, you can see the themes which emerged and were categorised using the Dedoose software programme. The table below (Table 1) further explains this process of categorising codes. The initials P, I, S or G next to the name of the issue, indicate the classification level: Individual; Group; Society or Political Career. The initial (P) next to the theme in Screenshot 1 represents *Political or community representation career challenges and choices*. The initial (S) classifies this factor as one which needs to be addressed at a *societal level*. The initial (I) is a factor which has impact at the level of the *individual*. The initial (G) is a factor which has impact at *representative group or community level*. It is not always possible to clearly define or box a factor into a particular level of classification and therefore many of the themes will be adressed at multiple levels.

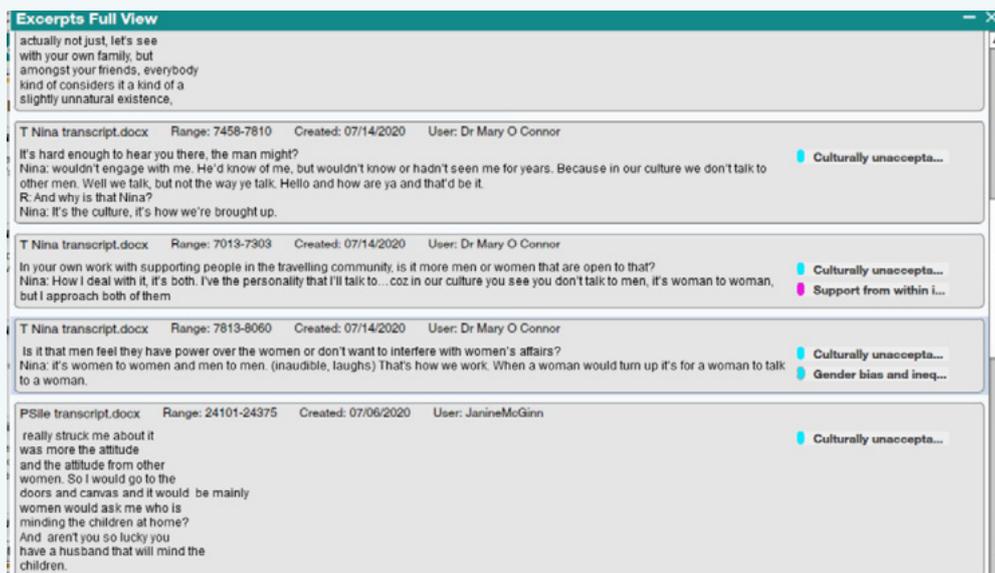
Behind each one of the codes illustrated in screenshot 1 are subthemes as shown in screenshot 2. Behind each subcode are the quotations taken directly from transcripts of the research participants' own words. For example, if the code "competitive nomination process" is selected as shown in screenshot 2, the quotations within this code appear. Some examples are shown in screenshot 3.



Screenshot 2. A selection of subcodes under a parent code.

The names are anonymised, what you see are pseudonyms.





Screenshot 3 Examples of quotations under a subcode

Summarising the findings

Table 1 below shows the ranking of the themes which emerged when engaging with participants. It is important to note that the theme which was most frequently referred to “political lifestyle conditions, career and associated challenges”, arose more prominently in the transcripts from the politicians’ grouping. However, highly relevant to all groups were gender related discussions and issues related to self-perception and confidence. Table 1 ranks the themes in order of frequency of mentions across the board, but caution in interpretation of this ranking is urged as this ranking is generalised across all sample groups. When these themes are examined within the specific sample groups, the level of importance attributed to the principal themes is different. Traveller Community research participants, for example, do not reference issues related to Political lifestyle conditions, career and associated challenges as much as the Political representatives in the sample.

ISSUES RANKING IN NUMBER OF MENTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS	FACTORS WHICH EMERGED AS HAVING IMPACT ON INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY/POLITICAL REPRESENTATION	CODES (REFERENCE TO THE CODE NUMBERS).	LEVEL OF IMPACT
ONLY APPLIES TO THE POLITICIANS GROUPING	Political challenges	Codes 2.1	Political and community representation career conditions and associated challenges
1.	Confidence & self-perception	Code 2.3)	Individual level
2.	Gender related issues (positive and negative)	Codes 2.2	Group and society levels
3.	Cultural & traditional	Codes 2.4	Society level
4.	Education – value and opportunity	Codes 2.5	Individual and society level
5.	Discrimination against community group	Code 2.6	Group level
6.	Conscious motivators to getting involved	Code 2.7)	Individual level
7.	What women bring to politics	Code 2.8	Individual, group and society levels
8.	Other significant factors mentioned: Childcare & maternity leave Speaking out experiences Meeting basic needs Women undermining women etc.		All levels
NOTE 1: THE ISSUES CODED UNDER BARRIERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ARE ALSO INCLUDED WHERE PERTINENT IN THE FINDINGS CODES ABOVE. BARRIERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ARE PRESENTED IN THE CONCLUSIONS CHAPTER OF THE REPORT.			

Table 1 Generic ranking of the themes in order of mentions by participants.

Appendix 5 Study limitations and recommendations for further Research

Study limitations

The main strength of the study is its cross-community insight into the rural political journey and the specific insights gleaned into each of the 35 women participants' experiences when engaging in the political system at community level and beyond in County Mayo.

However, there were a number of limitations to this study.

Although the participants were made up of eight different groups from diverse backgrounds, the sample size was small and may not be representative of women from similar groups in other parts of Mayo, or from different people in different groups. For that reason, there can be no generalisability of the findings, except to state that these were the findings within this particular group of people, who agreed to be participants.

The data was generated through focus groups using Zoom and Microsoft Teams (because of restrictions associated with government guidelines in relation to Covid-19) or over the telephone when participants opted this method of communication.

The sampling strategy used was a priori purposive sample where participants were women who were involved in either the political system and local organisations or community affairs in Mayo. Access to the sample was facilitated either by the Working Group involved in the research, who had access to different minority communities, or by the researchers using snowball sampling. The researchers believe that the data generated by the participants represented in this study represents an open and honest account of their experiences.

Recommendations for further research

Findings in the study highlight numerous areas which research could usefully explore. A small number of these are outlined.

The intersectional discrimination evident from some of the data from minority groups warrants further investigation and would make for a very interesting study. Of interest also are the experiences of migrant women with children who live in direct provision and the impact of that environment on their and their children's emotional and mental health. Similar research studies could be conducted in other counties using this methodology to test, for example different variables such as for example, whether or not geographical distance from the houses of the Oireachtas had impact on the level of female political representation.

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