

Why do so few Irish women get jobs as government ministers?

Wednesday, 8 Jul 2020 12:28. By Maeve O'Sullivan (Dr Maeve O'Sullivan is a lecturer in Human Resource Management at the HR Research Centre at Cork University Business School at UCC)

Source: <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0708/1152014-ireland-women-politics-government-ministers/>

About the Source: RTÉ's 'Brainstorming' project describes itself in the following terms: "...an unique partnership between RTÉ and Irish third level institutions, namely our Founding Partners UCC, NUIG, UL, DCU, Technological University Dublin and Maynooth University. We're pleased to welcome the Irish Research Council and Teagasc as our Strategic Partners. RTÉ Brainstorm is where the academic and research community will contribute to public debate, reflect on what's happening in the world around us and communicate fresh thinking on a broad range of issues." In other words, University academics, who write short summaries of big ideas using their expertise. Their goal is to make academic ideas easily accessible to novice readers. A **laudable** project and a must for Pol-Soc Students!!!

Opinion: recent general elections have increased female representation in Irish politics, but there's still glacial progress in attaining high office

There has been much discussion and disquiet regarding the geographical spread of cabinet and junior ministerial appointments in the 33rd Dáil. However, less attention has been given to the gendered nature of these choices. Defending these appointments recently on RTE's Six One news, Taoiseach Micheál Martin stated that role suitability trumped other considerations.

Despite the population being more or less evenly split between males and females, only 22.5% of TDs are women, who represent one-quarter of appointments to cabinet and junior ministries. The introduction of gender quotas in 2016 saw a doubling of female candidacy to 31% in the 2020 general election, compared with 2011. Despite this, 36 female TDs were elected in the February general election, an increase of just one since 2016.

Over 100 years after the appointment of Constance Markievicz as our first ever female cabinet minister, Ireland has made slow progress towards achieving a more gender-balanced representation in political life. This is despite the efforts of non-partisan political and business associations such as **Women for Election**, the **Women's Parliamentary Caucus** and **30% Club Ireland**.

Why is this the case? Do our perceptions of strong and effective leadership actually include women? Is political office in Ireland attractive or realistic for women? And does the public care about political under-representation by females and minority groups?

Through the Covid-19 crisis, countries with female leaders have reported proportionately six times fewer deaths compared with countries led by men. New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland and Norway have all suffered significantly fewer deaths per capita than Russia, the United States, Brazil and the UK, all countries led by authoritarian, bombastic men. In addition, these female-led countries are likely to see less-severe economic recessions ensuing from the crisis. While many countries led by men have handled the pandemic well, few led by women have mis-managed the crisis to date.

An analysis of how these female-led governments are dealing with the pandemic shows commonality in policy initiatives. There has been an early and decisive implementation of preventative measures with a focus on long-term social wellbeing over short-term economic considerations.

Traits frequently associated with female political leaders include pragmatism and attention to detail (Germany's **Angela Merkel**), empathy and humanity (New Zealand's **Jacinda Ardern**) and resilience (Taiwan's **Tsai Ing-wen**). Despite this, commentators caution against generalisations suggesting that women are better leaders. Arguments include few examples (10% of countries governed by women), other factors un-related to leadership, the culture of a country and the possibility of these successful leaders being the exception, rather than the rule.

Barriers to female political representation at national-level include **societal norms**, **gender-role expectations** and **poor work-family balance**. In her book: Madam Politician: The Women at the Table of Irish Political Power, Martina Fitzgerald highlights the gendered nature of voting decisions in the past. Former Tánaiste and minister Mary Harney recalls canvassing in the 1977 general election campaign. One woman who answered a door she knocked-on said "hold on, my husband decides the politics in this house".

Indeed, research in Irish and international contexts shows that women tend to **receive portfolios related to traditional feminine roles as care-givers** and mothers such as children, education, social welfare, justice, equality and the arts. Last week's female cabinet and junior ministerial appointments were to portfolios in justice, education, the arts, social protection and health.

The **family-hostile life** of a politician may also be a contributing factor to low female political participation. The Dáil sits three days per week but a TD's workload includes late-night sittings, votes and committee meetings. As all politics is local, much time is devoted to constituency work, clinics, meetings, the rubber chicken circuit and attending local funerals. There's also the weekly commute to consider, a particular issue for rural TDs. Job insecurity means that each general election campaign can feel like a six week, gruelling, repetitive job interview.

Women lead the government in 18 countries of the world, representing 7% of the global population. Despite this **paucity of representation**, female parliamentarians tend to work more collaboratively than men and strive to achieve better outcomes for women and society.

Practical solutions to achieving greater representation by women in politics include **gender quotas** in local elections, female-specific **mentoring and networking** opportunities, selecting candidates from **outside male-dominated networks** and running **female candidates for winnable seats**. "Women are 50% of the electorate", said Liberia's vice-president Jewel Howard Taylor, "why are they not electing more female leaders?"

Over 100 years since Irish women first got the right to vote and could stand for election, just 22 women have held senior ministerial office in Ireland prior to last week's appointments. They could all fit in a minibus. Forget senior hurling, it's time for senior camogie!

Before progressing with the questions below, in groups of three, complete a 'Think, Pair, Share' about the following Organizations and Female Leaders mentioned in the article. Share your findings and listen to the findings of the other members of your group!

Women for Election

Women's Parliamentary Caucus

30% Club Ireland

Angela Merkel

Jacinda Ardern

Tsai Ing-wen

Questions:

1. Evaluate the origin of this source. Would you consider it to be reliable? Why/Why Not?
2. Summarize the key data presented about the level of women's representation in Irish Politics.
3. The article notes "Through the Covid-19 crisis, countries with female leaders have reported proportionately six times fewer deaths compared with countries led by men." How does the author support this assertion? What 'Caveats' does she present about this argument?
4. Suggest **three** ways in which the author could incorporate visual representations of the data to help a reader of school-going age to better engage with the content and argument presented here.
5. The author identifies three significant barriers that women face when becoming properly represented at national level: **societal norms**, **gender-role expectations** and **poor work-family balance**. In your opinion, which of these issues is most likely to present the greatest barrier? Justify your answer.
6. Outline the 'practical solutions' that are designed to improve the level of female representation in Irish political life. Carry out an investigation of these different possible solution. Which of these do you think is likely to be most effective? Justify your answer.

Longer Answer:

To what degree do the argument and data presented by Dr O'Sullivan agree or disagree with Sylvia Walby's view that Patriarchy operate through the existence of 'The Patriarchal State' where the state is "oppressive to women through policies and laws"?

In your answer, ensure that your first sentence directly address the '**terms of the question**' remember to include a balance of '**quantitative**' and '**qualitative**' data, as well as engaging as much as possible with the Key Thinker's **terminology** (the technical words and phrases that she uses to present her argument). Conclude by reiterating your argument in light of the data that you have presented.