

A desire for gender equality in Irish politics is making itself known across the Republic of Ireland. A recent poll of over 1,000 people showed that 69% of those surveyed believed that local Councils would make better decisions if there were more women councillors. When asked to choose between two candidates, one man and one woman of equal merit, 58% said they would vote for the woman in order to increase female representation. Yet traditionally women have been under-represented in Irish politics. Women make up only 16% of elected representatives, an increase of just 1% in ten years, despite comprising about one third of the membership of the main political parties.

Women For Election is working to ensure that the pool of female candidates for office is not only present, but well-prepared and equipped for leading Ireland into the future. Through their programs and workshops, funded in part by The Ireland Funds, they have brought together hundreds of women from diverse political parties to receive practical support from experts in communication, political campaign strategy and leadership.

Founded in 2012 by Michelle O'Donnell Keating and Niamh Gallagher with a mission to inspire and equip women to succeed in political life, Women For Election has now held over 35 training programs across Ireland and the EU for women interested in becoming more politically involved in their community, in student politics or national politics. "The voice of women wasn't being heard in political debate," explains Michelle. "It wasn't being used as an influencer into how policy was being made. Our vision is of an Ireland and a world where men and women sit equally at the table in political life."

The skills of women coming to the election process have been honed in other areas. "We've worked with 600 women now in Ireland and in a number of other EU member states," says Niamh. "But particularly in Ireland we noticed that confidence was much more nuanced. The women who have been through our programs are running businesses, running community groups, they are active in trade unions. They're not unconfident, but most of them have not run for politics before and therefore they don't feel qualified to run for politics because they don't

INSPIRE, EQUIP, INFORM

The Ireland Funds are helping Women For Election Increase the Participation of Women in Irish Politics

**WOMEN
FOR
ELECTION**



DEIRDRE DONNELLY, INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE

"I don't think I'd be running if I hadn't gone through the training courses that had been provided by Women for Election. It was fantastic to get so much support and to meet all of these other powerful women who were so enthusiastic about the road ahead of them."

MIRIAM HENNESSY, GREEN PARTY

"It's about gender balance. It's not about one is better than the other. It is writing the combined song of both to create more than the separate genders. Women bring something different and men bring something different and together they can create something. That's what we're striving for."



bring that experience. So we've been identifying the skills and experiences that they already have that are entirely applicable to political life. And that's been very rewarding both for them and for us." And so, with tailored programs and advocacy, Women For Election are tackling the underrepresentation of women in politics and training women all across Ireland and the EU with both formal support and network creation. High-quality training is delivered by a variety of experts around all aspects of political campaigns, including building committed campaign teams, effective planning and administration, fundraising and budgeting, message development, presentation skills and managing the media. Women who participate report across the board that once inspired to participate, their levels of confidence and competence have increased.

The tangible results were first seen in the May, 2014 local and EU elections with an increase of 33% in the number of women holding seats in local politics. Of the women who were elected, half of them had participated in Women For Election training.

The practical mentoring for female candidates did not end with the election. The Ireland Funds have continued their support of Women For Election through the sponsorship of the first training session held for those women who had been elected. "With the support of The Ireland Funds, we took women on the next step of their political journey," says Michelle. "Over 64 newly-elected female councillors from across Ireland came together for an intense day focusing on building knowledge about their new role, developing negotiation skills and strategies while also networking with key policy makers and experienced senior politicians and supporters of Women for Election. We're delighted that The Ireland Funds could play such a key role in addressing the gender imbalance in Irish politics." To date, over 600 women have participated in the programs and The Ireland Funds are looking forward to seeing the further development of equality in Irish political life.

In May, 2014 the Republic of Ireland's first local and European elections were held since the formation of Women For Election. The resulting statistics were encouraging:

- 50% of women elected had benefited from the Women For Election training programs
- Out of a total of 949 seats, there were 196 women elected — a 33% jump since 2009
- Female representation in Local Government is now at 21%, up from 16% in 2009
- 2 Newly elected TDs (TD = Teachta Dála a member of Parliament) bring the number of women in the Dáil to 27, the highest ever
- 55% of those elected to the European Parliament were women



MICHELLE O'DONNELL KEATING & NIAMH GALLAGHER, FOUNDERS OF WOMEN FOR ELECTION

"When we were a new organization, in 2012, The Ireland Funds were one of the first organisations to get behind us through their grant round. What that meant was that we were taken seriously by other funders, both nationally and internationally." — Niamh Gallagher

"When we first set up in 2012, the political parties said to us, 'You have a great idea, good for you, but good luck, because you will never find the women.' So we said, 'Okay, we like a challenge and leave it with us.' Now, less than three years later, 600 women have been through our programmes." — Michelle O'Donnell Keating



JOSEPHA MADIGAN, FINE GAEL

"My head was saying, 'Why would you want this? Why would you take the grief? Why would you have people judge you?' But my heart wouldn't let it go. The minute I started on it, it actually felt right for me. I think that women bring a different viewpoint. Femininity is strength, it's not a weakness. I decided I have something to contribute."