

Many thanks for the opportunity to present at today's meeting as the Chair of the Women's Working Group on Causeway Coast and Glens Council.

Only 26% of all councillors in the north are female, this is well below the European average of 33% despite more than half of the population being female. While I am proud that Causeway Coast and Glens Council has the highest % of female elected representatives of all the councils- a lot of work still needs to be done.

More and more frequent reports from around the world indicate that when women step forward to claim their right to participate in politics, they are met by a backlash that encompasses harassment and abuse both online and offline, many local cases have been publicised recently. Such widespread attacks against politically active women are a clear indicator of the negative impact of unequal gender norms on the democratic health of our societies. This is the case not only here, but across the world.

Over the last century, significant progress has been made in women's numerical representation in politics around the world. But all too often, this has not directly translated into greater political influence. Political equality remains a distant goal.

Efforts to improve female representation in politics have often focused on quotas and reserved shares. What is really needed is a nuanced approach that tackles the underlying, interconnected barriers that women face in getting nominated for elected office, conducting successful campaigns and becoming effective, respected political representatives. For example, in my DEA Ballymoney, I was the only female candidate out of 12 on the ballot paper. I do not accept that this is good enough and we have to ask ourselves why are our women not putting themselves forward and more importantly we have to do something about it.

Some social scientists cite traditional family arrangements that limit women's career choices. Researchers at the Brookings Institution have found what might be called an ambition gap, generally within the population with women underestimating their abilities and chances for success. It makes them generally less likely than men to even consider seeking public office, or to have political professionals encourage them to run. This needs to change.

Research has suggested that lack of confidence and self-assurance is a key issue for women in political life or those with an interest in entering political life and this prevents many from entering the male dominated sphere of politics. We must provide a vehicle to change this.

Training and mentoring programmes which focus on helping women attain the knowledge, skills and confidence to stand for election and become effective respected, representatives once elected have been identified as one potential way to break down some of the barriers for political representatives and potential candidates.

There has been evidence from social scientists that in the general population there is a particular crisis for women—a vast confidence gap that separates the sexes. According to research, compared with men, women don't consider themselves as ready for promotions, they predict they'll do worse on tests, and they generally underestimate their own abilities. This disparity stems from factors ranging from upbringing to biology to social norms bearing in mind that women only garnered the right to vote and stand for election just over 100 years ago, it appears that change in politics, acceptance for women in the arena and confidence has seen slow progress In this time.

A growing body of evidence shows just how devastating this lack of confidence can be. Success in every walk of life, it turns out, correlates just as closely with confidence as it does with competence. No wonder that women, despite all our progress, are still woefully underrepresented at the highest levels.

While we have some of the most confident, politically astute female representatives in this chamber a lack of confidence can impact us all and in particular those outside this chamber who have not, but may have considered, putting themselves forward for political office, as community representatives or other key figures in the wider political and civic landscape. As political representatives, We are supposed to be leaders in our society, role models to young women and yet are not very often afforded adequate training and development which gives thought to differing learning styles and differing

approaches identified in research as being important for most women and the different styles and approaches more comfortable for some women. This results in limited opportunities to fulfil our own potential and bring other women with us. The lack of provision in policy, within local government and beyond, for issues impacting women is something that our committee is committed to change. For example, the menopause is an issue impacting women in the workforce and yet only within the last 2 years has policy been put forward in this council setting support and provisions in place for this very often life altering event. Many workplaces in the public and private sector have no policies in place and as a result women experiencing the menopause are marginalised and many forced out of the workforce. This is only one example of how society has not evolved to promote women's full and equal participation and only direct action can change this.

We are political representatives. We have a duty to challenge and change the unequal, unspoken and sometimes un noticed gender norms that exist within political life and whether we want to admit it or not exists within councils and every other sphere of political influence here and indeed worldwide.

Some of these gender norms are unconscious and entirely unintended, however, we have a duty to identify and challenge these at every opportunity.

The establishment of our women's working group has brought together our elected representatives from all parties and none to look specifically at these issues and many others to educate and empower. A group that is be able to reach out to other organisations, sectors, our young women and girls and those employees of local government to harness experience and expertise to share skills and find a way to tackle some of the serious issues impacting women in our society in political life and outside it.

Established in 2020, the women's working group has already taken action to challenge some of these issues head on. Many of our members have already completed ILM Level 7 qualifications in leadership and management and we anticipate many more will be afforded this opportunity. This group has successfully put forward motions on Violence against women and girls which compelled council actions on this matter. Our International Women's Day event hosted by the Mayor, attracted women from all sections of society for a range of networking and events which we aim to build on. We are working to

collaborate with the Women's Rural Network to create opportunities to build relationships, feed into the Community Development plan and take forward partnership working to address issues impacting women with interconnected links across the community, public and civic society.

But there is much work yet to be done and we are only one local government body, I would encourage all councils including the NAC to consider their approach to women's representation and equal participation, review policies and procedures and look at how we can come together as political representatives to eradicate unequal gender norms in every sphere of influence, increasing women's' representation and participation. We aim to meet with the Assembly Women's Caucus to discuss their approach and potential for collaborative working across political institutions and would be happy to engage with any local government body likewise.

Many thanks for taking the time to listen today.