Women's
Collective
Ireland
Limerick

Addressing Sexism in Politics

Creating Safe, Inclusive and Accessible Political Spaces for Everyday Women

Report Title:

Addressing Sexism in Politics
Creating Safe, Inclusive and Accessible Political Spaces for Everyday Women
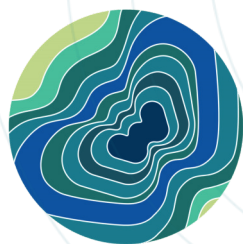
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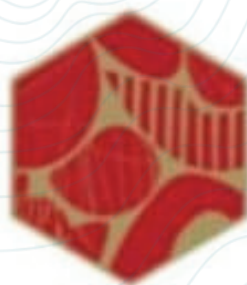*Lead Author*
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Together *for* Safety.

TUS Social Sciences ConneXions

"'CUNT' he said close to my face. 'That means C U Next Tuesday'. He grabbed my hand and said, 'that means CUNT', again".

"My male colleague said to me when I disagreed with him, 'I'm not here to do what your mother should have done and put manners on you'"

"A meeting ran late and a male colleague took out his phone and took a selfie of us without asking if he could. I asked him what he was doing and he said it was 'to prove to his wife that he was where he said he was'."

About Women's Collective Ireland - Limerick (WCI Limerick)

Founded in 1999, WCI Limerick (previously Limerick Women's Network) was established in Limerick in response to research carried out by PAUL Partnership into the Unmet Needs of Women. WCI Limerick is one of 17 Women's Community Development Projects, under the Women's Collective Ireland umbrella. WCI Limerick aims to promote gender equality among women who experience multiple forms of oppression. They provide information to women on a range of issues including health and wellbeing, screening services and men's violence against women services. Additionally, they provide direct support to women to return to education and training to access employment and/or volunteering opportunities, as well as topic-specific workshops and events. A key part of their work is contributing to public consultations relating to women's issues and broader societal issues using a gendered lens. They were instrumental in the establishment of the Limerick Women's Caucus, the first of its kind at a local level in the country. Since 2019, Women's Collective Ireland - Limerick have been working specifically to strengthen and increase the participation and representation of women in local politics. In that time they have run courses, workshops and events that have engaged over 150 women locally.

**Working in association with TUS Midwest research group –
EDGE (Exploring diversity, gender, & exclusion)**

Acknowledgements

Women's Collective Ireland Mission

*To support grassroots women, through collective and practical actions, to
achieve their full human rights and true equality.*

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Executive Summary

Led by Women's Collective Ireland - Limerick (WCI Limerick), the purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of women who are involved in politics, of the experiences of unelected women who support other women who are involved in politics, of the experiences of women activists, and to identify the barriers and enablers for Creating Safe, Inclusive and Accessible Political Spaces for All Women[1].

The fieldwork for this report took place between November 2022 and August 2023. The authors extended invitations to women who were elected to local and national political office across political parties from different locations around the country, as well as women who are not elected but have run campaigns in the past and are still in the political domain. In total six women – five elected and one not elected –participated in one-to-one interviews. These took place online via Zoom and lasted approximately 1 hour. The purpose of the interviews was to explore their experiences of sexism in political spaces.

This was followed by invitations to local women who are involved in supporting women who are elected to political office and/or who are engaged in social and political activism to take part in focus groups, with the aim of ascertaining:

I.   What prevents them from officially becoming involved in local politics or running for election? What would they need to get more involved?

II.   What are their suggestions for change?

In total 11 women participated in focus groups which were held in person in WCI Limerick offices. Informed consent, verbal and written, was obtained.

Following this, a survey was issued online which yielded 74 responses from women. An additional action, arising from the survey results, was informing a WCI Limerick submission to the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life, calls for which preceded the publication of the research.

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[1] For the purposes of clarity, 'Women' in this report is inclusive of our Trans sisters.

Key Findings

> *"Please cease to exist, you are the problem, not the solution."*

Politics as a 'Male Space'

The data revealed that despite improvements in the level of women elected to political offices, parliament and council chambers remain a 'male space' with women expected to adjust their behaviour to 'act like men'. The findings indicated that women in politics do not just face sexism from anonymous online accounts, they also face it from their colleagues and in their workplaces. There is a false belief that those who engage in sexist behaviour and misogyny, whether online or in the world, are unknown to the victims, socially reclusive, or not part of the community. The research emerging worldwide, and the experiences shared with us in this research paint a different picture. The perpetrators are often highly embedded in the community, socially involved, and working full time. They are men we know, men we like and men we vote for. All the participants who took part in the interviews, focus groups, and the survey, identified politics as a place that is hostile to women in which sexism is endemic and structural within the system. Personal and family safety were identified as key concerns. Experiences of male colleagues forcefully standing together and refusing to let a female TD get through to an event were reported, as well as female TDs having to witness male TDs acting aggressively and 'squaring up to each other in the Dáil bar'. This was also reflected in the scheduling of what were considered 'women's issues' and 'men's issues', with women's issues being relegated to the 'graveyard shift' on a Thursday evening whilst male TDs went back to their constituency offices preferring not to participate in what were seen as 'women's issues'.

Sexism

> **"You have put the women's movement back decades with that little stunt. Once you let women away with a little, they always want more."**

A recurring theme throughout the data was experiences of sexism by male TDs toward their female counterparts. Here women reported how they were often the only female members of committees and when those committee meetings ran over time the Chair would ask only the women if they needed to make childcare arrangements. Despite the fact that several of the male TDs in the committee were also parents, they were never asked about childcare arrangements. One woman even reported being 'shushed' by male

colleagues when trying to speak at a meeting at which she was the only woman at the table. In addition, women reported experiences of being accosted by their male counterparts for putting themselves forward for positions that were 'earmarked for men' resulting in accusations of 'putting the women's movement back decades and claims that *'once you let women away with a little, they always want more'*.

Harassment Inside and Outside of Political Spaces

> **"'CUNT', he said close to my face.
> 'That means C U Next Tuesday'.
> He grabbed my hand and said, 'that means CUNT' again"**

In line with national and international evidence, women reported frequent experiences of harassment both inside and outside political spaces, online and face to face, and very often, by men they know and work with. This extended to being physically held back by male colleagues from going to the front in events such as photo-calls, to being held forcefully by the hand and being called a 'cunt'. Women also reported experiences of abuse online and while out canvassing. Equally, unelected women highlighted the fear of harassment and attacks from the far right as a deterrent from entering politics. Additionally, women involved in political activism mentioned backlash they faced due to this work, such as videos being made about them that included comments made referring to their appearance, sexuality and personal lives, misleading and inaccurate information about them and the sharing of their images and personal information without permission. In some instances, the places of work of these women were identified resulting in phone calls - and in one case, a physical visit to their workplace - from men claiming to be journalists looking to speak to the women.

Lack of Party Support for Women

> *"Often the Parties' response is 'don't be online'"*

Lack of party support extended to women was also cited frequently. This extended to support with canvassing and dealing with abuse and harassment. There was a view that women were used as 'window dressing' by parties and used simply 'as props', with women reporting being punished if they don't 'stay in their lanes'. The data also indicated that parties do not want women to complain about their negative treatment or experience of

sexism and do not know how to respond to requests for help from women. Some reported being discouraged from running for election. Unelected women also expressed concerns about a lack of party support for women particularly as it related to childcare, work-life balance and safeguarding women from harassment.

Gender Quotas

> *"It is still such a boys club, sometimes women and other minorities are there just for quotas or other reasons"*

The data accentuated the importance of gender quotas for ensuring equal representation of women in politics. However, there was a view that gender quotas were not being taken seriously by the party hierarchies who engage in box ticking exercises by reaching the quota requirement on the ballot, but not putting the necessary resources behind the candidate or by running women for seats that are not winnable. The data also highlighted the need to introduce gender quotas to Óireachtas and local government committees to ensure equal participation among men and women in decision and policy-making processes. Women who were unelected reinforced this view and felt that quotas were being added and filled performatively, rather than valuing or welcoming women into the political structures or actively working to make them safe. Quotas need to be for seats won, not just women run.

> *"I was advised not to 'play the gay card'"*

Diverse Women

The data suggested that there was little to no party support for diverse women to get into politics, to stay in or to be made to feel valued or welcomed. This extended especially to women of colour, working class women, Traveller women, women with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ women. Women linked this to the overrepresentation of white men in politics. Women reported how this can make political spaces unwelcoming and challenging for them to enter, particularly when they have intersecting identities. They reported that it is very difficult to be in rooms where they are the only woman.

Enablers to Creating Safe, Inclusive and Accessible Political Spaces for Women

The participants offered several actions that would contribute to making political spaces safe, inclusive, and accessible for them. These included political parties taking gender quotas seriously and selecting credible women candidates for winnable seats. This involves investing the same level of effort and resources in raising the profile of women candidates and running them in seats that are 'winnable' and against men candidates at comparable stages of political experience. Expanding gender quotas to include committee membership was also identified as an important part of ensuring gender equality in policy and decisions.

Another key strategy is to introduce gender quotas for seats won, not just for candidates run. This is a requirement that needs to be backed up with meaningful fines for parties that don't reach the quotas and financial incentives for those that do.

Women also highlighted the need for parties not to put further burden and labour on women and people with minority identities by expecting them to solve these problems or educate their colleagues. Mandatory cultural competency and anti-racist training for all party members, and all elected and non-elected staff members working in political spaces was recommended in addition to mandatory training for men on understanding sexism, misogyny and conscious and unconscious bias. Men being expected to take an active role in calling out and reporting incidents of sexism, harassment and poor treatment of women was also identified as a key part of making political spaces safe and inclusive for women, coupled with men eradicating the expectation of anti-family hours by actively sharing care work equally. Women also identified the need for men to volunteer to help women get elected and to organise events as a key source of support in both getting women elected and making politics a more tolerable place for them to stay in. Finally, logistical support with key campaign work like putting up posters is vital. One woman described how she was told to 'get her GAA friends to help her' to put up her posters. Even the advice given is highly gendered and exclusionary to many people who are not able-bodied men.

Background/Context

National and international data shows that men are overrepresented in all levels of political decision-making (UN Women, 2023). Yet, data shows that female political representation has substantial positive effects on policy making and implementation when power is shared equally (Hessami and Lopes da Fonseca, 2020; UN Economic and Social Council, 2021). Following European trends, Ireland introduced legislation on Gender Quotas in 2016 to increase the number of female candidates that each party must select to contest Local, National, and European elections. Against this backdrop, Women's Collective Ireland - Limerick intensified their work on increasing and strengthening women's participation and representation in politics and this acted as a catalyst for this preliminary research. Whilst data shows that the introduction of gender quotas worldwide has yielded some progress in the level of female representatives in politics, in Ireland it remains the case that men continue to outnumber women in politics to date (SJI, 2022). This outnumbering is significant with men holding 77% Dáil seats, 62% Seanad seats, and 74% local council seats in 2023 (Women for Election Data Hub. 2023), while making up just 49% of the population (CSO. 2022). While there are many contributing elements to this, this report is examining the experiences of sexism by women in these political spaces so dominated by men.

Research carried out by Van Der Wilk (2018) highlighted how "Online spaces reflect the public sphere, where traditionally, women are unwelcome and under threat". Particularly, "Women with visibility, who assert their views, take power, are being vocal, challenge norms or simply defend their intersecting identities are targets for cyber violence and hate speech"..As well as politicians and journalists, Van Der Wilk specifically names Women Human Rights Defenders and women blogging about politics or identifying as feminist as those also facing great risks of online abuse.

It is well documented that women in political spaces are subjected to higher rates of bullying, mistreatment, and harassment. This has been linked to inducing trauma, resulting in severe and long-lasting emotional shock and pain. In 2022, UN Women released a report on accelerating efforts to tackle online and technology-facilitated violence against women and girls. They argued that:

> "The impact of online violence against women and girls can be as harmful as offline violence with negative effects on the health and wellbeing of women and girls as well as serious economic, social and political impacts".

They go on to stress that it is not just women in political roles who are impacted and refer to "women in public life" which comprises women's rights activists, women human rights

defenders, women in politics, and women journalists. They also, rightfully, noted other groups where women and girls were at greater risk from online violence, including women with intersecting identities, which consists of women living with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ and black, minority and migrant women and girls, as well as young women and girls (UN Women. 2022.p 5).

The trauma and impact of online violence and harassment has an added complication due to it being more difficult to pinpoint. While it might be easy for some to minimize and normalize, 'it was just a tweet, get over it', when it comes to the online world, women do not know if any of the threats will or will not come to pass. As Elizabeth Lee put it "This type of harassment is particularly insidious, because, unlike in the physical world, it can be difficult for the victim to ascertain the true nature of the threat, given that the messages are virtual and, often, anonymous. The lack of a clearly identifiable source of danger, where you cannot point your finger and say, "There it is," leads to an increase in symptoms of anxiety and (appropriate) paranoia" (Cited in McLain 2017).

At a recent Joint Óireachtas Committee debate on the Challenges Facing Women Accessing Education, Leadership and Political Roles, a representative spoke about how they had received a rape threat from simply putting their photograph up on social media. They went on to describe the impact it had on them, their actions afterwards and how it resulted in them having to manage the feelings of loved ones, while simultaneously managing their own. Moreover, they did not report this to the Gardaí as they took it as 'par for the course in politics' . A related aspect of this is the amount of time it takes to report something to the Gardaí. On top of women in politics' already excessive schedule it is often not possible to find the amount of time it takes to make a formal report to the Gardaí, especially when there is a widely held belief that "sure there's no point, is there? They can't do anything anyway".

There are several knock-on effects of this. Firstly, it means that we have no true sense of how widespread these incidents are. Secondly, the true extent of the impact they have on women and diverse people in political spheres is unknown, except where we observe them leaving, and we continue to be left with political spaces filled predominately with white middle-class men. Thirdly, there is a significant chilling impact of abuse on the person it is aimed at, but also on everyone in the same social group as that person. They see what happens when women speak out, and so they do not. This has a profoundly anti-democratic implication. Finally, the perpetrators become emboldened and continue to behave with impunity and the problem escalates.

When it comes to perpetrators of violence against women and girls, be it online or in the real world, conversations rarely focus on the perpetrator. As Van Der Wilk (2018) pointed out, "as the spot lights have traditionally been on the victims, for cultural and systemic reasons associated with power, very few studies have analysed, in depth, the profile of perpetrators and their geographic distribution".

However, a recent UK study (2022) shed light on perpetrators of online abuse. It found that 63% were strangers, 31% were friends / acquaintances, 18% were previous partners and 7% were family members (Dixon.2022). While focus on perpetrators is in its infancy stages, it is becoming clear that perpetrators of abuse, whether online or face to face, are not always strangers and are very likely to be known to the victims. One study on cyber violence conducted by Women's Rights Organisations from three Nordic Countries (Iceland, Denmark & Norway) in 2017 found that perpetrators are typically men. A study cited by UN Women (2022) that includes self-reporting from perpetrators, identified several motivating factors among men for this type of behaviour. These included revenge, sexual gratification, social status building or financial gain with power and control as a key overarching theme across these different motivations. The literature suggests that women working in politics, activism or community settings are more often subjected to online abuse that is gendered and misogynistic in nature. Furthermore, many of these anti-feminist and anti-women subcultures of the internet are inextricably linked with the far right and its continuous rise.

Evidence suggests that it is not possible to talk about safe participation in political life without mentioning the actions and impact of the far right. A reoccurring theme in the work of the WCI Limerick around increasing the political participation among women is their reluctance to enter politics out of fear arising from the threat of the far right in this country. Far right groups oppose gender equality policies and defend nationalist ideologies based on strictly traditional gender roles. Additionally, the far right do not just use gender to push their agenda, they use race. The intent of intersecting gender and racism has been identified as serving to escalate extremist crisis tropes and justify racial violence (Dixon 2022). The threat of the far right and how they operate puts women, particularly migrant women, and women from minority groups, at risk when engaging in politics or activism. This has led some to conclude that the objective of far right activity is to shift the centre ground to the right and the right to the far right while disrupting the left and all progressive social movements and campaigns. Embedded in this are deeply conservative and reactionary ideas about race, religion, hierarchy, nationalism, gender roles, and science (Dixon 2022).

Against this backdrop, to better understand the barriers and enablers to increasing the level of representation and participation of women in politics, this research sought to understand the experiences of women who are elected to political offices and the experiences of unelected women who are already involved or who have an interest in becoming involved in politics. Identifying the barriers and enablers is key to increasing the number of women contesting elections and becoming involved in politics.

The following section sets out the research methods and the remainder of the report contains the themes to emerge from the data followed by conclusions and recommendations.

Methods

Reflecting the inclusive ethos underpinning the Women's Collective Ireland - Limerick, together with the evidence that highlights how individuals who are excluded, including on the basis of gender, rarely have a say in the agendas and priorities of projects that aim to support them, this research used a mixed methods approach. Following Nagle's (2001) contention that "voice is the tool by which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives", data were collected using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. This was followed by an online survey issued via WCI Limerick social media channels and their newsletter. The survey was anonymous and opened for a two week period from the end of July to mid-August 2023.

Informed Consent:

Verbal and written consent was obtained from the participants before the qualitative data collection. This consisted of detailed information sheets outlining the purpose of the research, confidentiality, anonymity, and how the data would be used. They also outlined the participant's right to decline to take part in the study and to withdraw from it. Details of whom to contact in the event that a participant had any concerns or questions about the research were also listed. Consent sheets were issued to each participant. All names or personal details given throughout the interviews and focus groups were omitted from the transcripts. The online survey was completely anonymous with no identifying information collected from respondents. The survey was voluntary; respondents had the choice to participate or not.

Participants:

Because the purpose of the evaluation was to explore women's experiences of political spaces and the barriers and enablers to supporting women to become involved in local politics or run for elections, a purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants. Public records were used to identify elected representatives who fitted the criteria for participation, together with mailing lists of WCI Limerick. All the public representatives had over a decade of experience of running in national elections and there was sexual and ethnic diversity across the participants. The age range was between 35-55 years. Equally across focus groups with unelected women there was a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and sexualities, with an average age range between 25-65 years.

The interviews were conducted by Zoom at times that suited the schedules of the women. The focus groups were conducted in person. The data was transcribed from detailed written notes of interviews and focus groups and rechecked manually for accuracy. In total 17 women opted to participate in interviews and focus groups for the research, broken down as follows:

Elected	Unelected
6 women	11 women

Reflexive Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) was used to analyse the data and was approached through a gendered lens. Below are the key themes that emerged from the data.

Findings & Analysis

Politics as a 'Male Space'

"If there are motions about breastfeeding or miscarriage or childcare they're considered women's stuff"

The data revealed that despite improvements in the level of women elected to political offices, parliament and council chambers remain a 'male space' with women expected to adjust their behaviour to 'act like men'. Experiences of male colleagues forcefully standing together and refusing to let a female TD get through to an event were reported, as well as female TDs having to regularly witness male TDs acting aggressively and 'squaring up to each other in the Dáil bar'. This was also reflected in the scheduling of what was considered "women's issues" and "men's issues" with women's issues being relegated to the 'graveyard shift' whilst male TDs went back to their constituency offices preferring not to participate in what were seen as women's issues.

"I was at a photo call and was physically held back by a male colleague from going to the front and held in a place where I wouldn't be seen in the picture".

***

"If there are motions about breastfeeding or miscarriage or childcare they're considered women's stuff"

*Another female TD recalled how she was on her way to an event in the Dáil and
"Two male colleagues were forcefully standing together and refusing to let me get through at
an event".*

*Another recalled "being entirely surrounded by a group of shouting men when a vote was
called and being unable to move".*

Others described having to witness male TDs aggressively squaring up in the Dáil bar

*"The place is full of men" said one TD, "I've seen them aggressively square up to each other in
the Dáil bar".*

As one female TD explained

*"Thursday afternoon is considered 'the graveyard shift' because everyone has gone back to
their constituencies; that's when they schedule what they consider 'women's stuff".*

Reinforcing this, another female TD stated

*"We'll get relegated to the bullshit slot" or the issues "will get kicked to the women's caucus".
The box is ticked but it's not genuine engagement".*

In this context, women described how they are 'expected to act like men' if they wanted to fit into political spaces, as opposed to men changing what was deemed to be inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour in any context, particularly in a political one. Therefore, whilst the level of female representation may be changing, the attitudes and behaviours of male politicians appear not to be. Instead, the data suggested that male attitudes and behaviours in political spaces remain indicative of when political spaces were exclusively the preserve of predominantly white, middle-class males. When asked in the survey if they felt politics was welcoming to everyone, one woman said, 'It's welcoming to those who see themselves well represented - so for now, that means middle aged white men'.

Sexism

Sexist elements in attacks on female politicians, gendered slurs used against female candidates, sexist character assassinations launched on women in politics and sexual harassment of female elected representatives are well documented (Bligh et al., 2012; Drenjanin, 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, a recurring theme throughout the data was experiences of sexism on the part of male TDs toward their female counterparts. Here women reported how they were often the only female members of committees and when those committee meetings ran over time, the Chair would ask the woman only, if they needed to make childcare arrangements. This was despite the fact there were several of

the male TDs in the committee who were also parents but they were never asked about childcare arrangements pertaining to their children. Women also reported being 'shushed' by male colleagues when trying to speak at a meeting at which they were the only woman at the table. In addition, women reported experiences of being accosted by their male counterparts for putting themselves forward for positions that were 'earmarked for men' resulting in accusations of them putting the women's movement back decades and claims *that 'once you let women away with a little, they always want more'.*

"A committee I was in ran late one evening, I was the only woman, and when the chair said we would have to extend the meeting he asked me, and only me, if I needed to make childcare arrangements even though there were plenty of men in the room that were also parents"
***
"I was shushed by a male colleague when I tried to speak at a meeting at which I was the only woman at the table"
***
"You have brought the women's movement back decades with this little stunt" (when she went for a position that had been earmarked for a man).
***
"Once you let women away with a little, they always want more" a woman was told by a male colleague.

Another elected female recalled putting herself forward for a role and being told she was 'stabbing her male colleague in the back', she heard 'who the fuck does she think she is' and that she was 'a woman scorned' and beware 'wrath of women'. She also heard how she was 'only thinking about herself" and 'not a team player'. This was in comparison to her male colleague being described as more suitable owing to him being 'strategic', 'tactical', and 'inspiring confidence'. This was a unified view among the women that there was 'a massive blind spot' among male politicians whereby 'they just do not see the sexism'. Collectively, women described these experiences as having taken a huge toll on their health and wellbeing and undermining their sense of legitimacy in political spaces.

Harassment Inside and Outside of Political Spaces

Research indicates that the threat of the far right and how they operate puts women, particularly migrant women, and women from minority groups, at risk when engaging in politics or activism (Hope and Courage, 2023). In line with national and international evidence, women reported frequent experiences of harassment both inside and outside political spaces. This extended to being physically held back by male colleagues from going to the front in events such as photo-calls, to being held by the hand and being called a cunt.

> *"CUNT" he said close to my face. "That means see you next Tuesday". He grabbed my hand and said "that means CUNT" again".*

Several of the women highlighted the abuse they get online referring to it as 'absolutely brutal for women in politics. Brutal'. They described how they went to their Parties about the online abuse and threats and were told 'don't be online'. Equally, unelected women highlighted the fear of online harassment and attacks from the far right as a deterrent from entering politics. Fear of harassment and abuse was consistently cited by unelected women, coupled with threats from the far right as a major deterrence from entering politics.

> *"The amount of hate female politicians face online is very off-putting"*
> ***
> *"Because of the things that people see, especially on social media, why would anyone, women, people of a different ethnicity get involved? Why would anyone want to be harassed and targeted on social media"*
> ***
> *"The abuse politicians particularly women and minority politicians face online is disturbing."*
> ***
> *"With all them far rights movements? wouldn't dare put myself in line with the firing squad"*
> ***
> *"The current rise of the right would frighten anyone entering/in politics"*

These experiences reflected the findings of Van Der Wilk (2018) who argued that online spaces tend to reflect the public sphere, where traditionally, women are unwelcome and under threat particularly when they are asserting their views, taking power, being vocal, challenging norms or simply defending intersecting identities, thus becoming targets for cyber violence and hate speech. The data supports the urgent need for legislation to deal comprehensively with hate speech. This includes making social media companies accountable for facilitating hate speech and the targeting of women, particularly minority women. The experiences and fears of harassment outlined above were seen as an implication of not having such legislation and were directly linked with women exiting politics and making other women fearful of becoming involved in politics.Additionally, women involved in political activism mentioned the backlash they faced due to this work, such as, videos being made about them that included comments made referring to their appearance, sexuality and personal lives, misleading and inaccurate information about them and the sharing of their images and personal information without permission. In some instances, the places of work of these women were identified resulting in phone calls and, in one case a physical visit, to said workplaces from men claiming to be journalists looking to speak to the women.

Lack of Party Support for Women

Lack of party support extended to women was also cited frequently. This extended to support with canvassing and dealing with abuse and harassment. There was a view that women were used as 'window dressing' by parties and as props, with women expected to 'stay in their lanes'. The data also indicated that parties do not want women to complain about their negative treatment or experience of sexism and do not know how to respond to requests for help from women. Some reported being discouraged from running for election. Several elected representatives opined that in their experience...

> *"Women are often used as props"*
> ***
> *"Women are used as 'window dressing' by parties"*
> ***
> *"We are told not to run"*
> ***
> *"It [politics] is the filthiest business you can get into and your own party are the filthiest"*
> ***
> *"Anything that makes work more flexible is said to be 'for women' and we're made feel like it's a treat we're being given"*

A lack of party support was seen as actively discouraging women, both entering politics and staying it in. Here the women highlighted how men, particularly those within their own parties, need to actively break the expectation of anti-family working hours by stepping up for childcare and care-work themselves. They expressed the need for men within parties to invest more time and effort to help female candidates to get elected. Finally, there was a unified view that male party members needed to stand with other women and be anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-classist.

Gender Quotas

The data accentuated the importance of gender quotas for ensuring equal representation of women in politics. However, there was a view that gender quotas were not being taken seriously by men and this was exemplified in running first-time women in seats against men who had a long-established record in the constituencies thus making the seats unwinnable for women. The data also highlighted the need to introduce gender quotas to committees to ensure equal participation among men and women in decision and policy-making processes.

> *"Loads of committees are only men. It's like group think,*
> *a bunch of white men talking to each other"*
>
> ***
>
> *"People don't realise that the make-up of a committee impacts the topics covered by the*
> *committee. I was on a committee with a group of men that were like boys with toys and*
> *insisted on only looking at the latest cool tech and not the safety issues. There should be a*
> *gender quota requirement for committees."*

Women who were unelected reinforced this view and felt that quotas were viewed as meeting the requirements to have women and minorities as opposed to valuing or welcoming them into the political structures.

> *"It is still such a boys club, sometimes women and other minorities are there just for quotas or*
> *other reasons"*
> ***
> *"It's welcoming to those who see themselves well represented - so for now, that means*
> *middle aged white men"*
> ***
> *"There's still discrimination against candidates who are not Irish born".*

Here the data indicated that whilst gender quotas were necessary and had the potential to have a positive impact on increasing the number of female candidates elected, it also underscored the need for a mind shift on the part of male politicians if women who are elected were to be treated as equal peers to their male counterparts, made to feel safe in political spaces and afforded the respect to do their jobs free from harassment, sexism and undermining. In the absence of this mindshift accompanying gender quotas, there was a view that women would continue to serve as mere 'props' for political parties for 'box ticking purposes'.

Diverse Women

Evidence shows that women from under-represented groups are less visible in politics and face multiple obstacles to participation, such as discrimination, the weight of prejudice, risk of violence, fear of stigmatization, barriers within political parties and a lack of recognition of their skills (Gjermeni, 2022). This was reflected in the finding of this research with the data indicating that there was little to no party support for diverse women to get into politics, to stay in politics or to be made to feel valued or welcomed. This extended especially to women of colour, working class women, Traveller women, women with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ women. Women linked this to the overrepresentation of mostly white able bodied men in politics. Women reported how this

can make political spaces unwelcoming and challenging for women to enter, particularly when women have intersecting identities, expressing the view that 'there is no place for a gay woman in politics'. This was exemplified in experiences of homophobic comments in the course of their public duties and a lack of party support for dealing with this. For others, underrepresented women in politics were either invisible or seen as a threat and not an asset by white male politicians.

> *"They don't see people who aren't cis white men in positions of power. When they do, their very existence feels like a threat".*

For women who are members of ethnic minorities, the overrepresentation of white males coupled with particularly low numbers of ethnic minorities, engenders feelings of being outside, of loneliness and of pressure to be solely representative of an entire population.

> *"Overall the representation is white settled Irish and it's difficult not to feel like an outsider even when the space is safe or welcoming. It's sometimes lonely being a sole voice but it's also a lot of pressure, particularly when discussing Traveller issues as my understanding and analysis is simply mine and not that of an entire community. I sometimes feel like political parties don't understand this and my presence is a tick-the-box exercise".*

However, running for politics, despite the multiple obstacles, diverse women deemed entering politics worth doing 'just to see someone who looks like me there' so that children from diverse backgrounds will know that 'voices like theirs matter and are being heard'. These findings shine a particular light on how gender equality in politics is more than just opening the political doors and giving women a seat at the table. Instead, they highlight the need for a cultural shift in politics and the media that focus on the skills and talents of women as opposed to their gender and characteristics.

Enablers to Creating Safe, Inclusive and Accessible Political Spaces for Women

Policy and academic literature offer several solutions for creating safe, inclusive, and accessible political spaces for women. However, this research viewed women as experts by experience and they offered several actions that would contribute to making political spaces safe, inclusive, and accessible for them. These included political parties taking gender quotas seriously and selecting credible female candidates for winnable seats. This included investing the same level of effort and resources in raising the profile of female candidates and running them in seats that are 'winnable' and against male candidates at

comparable stages of political experience. Expanding gender quotas to include committee membership was also identified as an important part of ensuring gender equality in policy and decisions. Women highlighted the need for parties not to put further burden and labour on women and people with minority identities. Cultural competency and anti-racism training for party members, and all elected and non-elected staff members working in political spaces is needed. Additionally, mandatory training for men on understanding sexism, misogyny and conscious and unconscious bias is necessary. Men taking an active role in calling out and reporting incidents of sexism, harassment and poor treatment of women was also identified as a key part of making political spaces safe and inclusive for women, coupled with men eradicating the expectation of anti-family hours by actively sharing care work equally. Finally, women identified the need for men to volunteer to help women get elected and to organise events as a key source of support in both getting women elected and making politics a more tolerable place for them to stay in.

Conclusions

This research set out to understand the experiences of women who are elected to local and national political office and the experiences of unelected women who have some political involvement and those who have an interest in becoming involved in politics, to better understand the barriers and enablers to creating safe, inclusive, and accessible political spaces for everyday women in Ireland. The findings add to the limited but growing body of literature as it relates to the experiences of women in politics in the Irish context. The findings revealed that despite the increasing presence of women in political spaces, parliament in Ireland remains steeped in 'male culture' often requiring women to adjust their behaviour to 'act like men' to be considered legitimate politicians. The implications of this were women often being exposed to male aggression and distinctions between 'men's' and 'women's' issues being made. This almost exclusively resulted in women's issues being relegated to the 'graveyard shift' in the Dáil schedule, denoting their lack of importance.

The findings also highlight how everyday sexism is not only a common occurrence for elected women in Ireland but also serves as a key deterrence for women and activists entering politics and political spaces. Experiences of harassment and threats were in line with national and international evidence. Women reported frequent experiences of harassment throughout the research. This occurred both inside and outside political spaces and extended to physical aggression on the part of men, and to experiences of online

abuse, inspiring the quote that it is 'absolutely brutal for women in politics. Brutal'.

The findings indicated that party responses to women who experience harassment and abuse are lacking in support – the only advice being: 'don't be online'. Equally, unelected women highlighted the fear of online harassment and attacks from the far right as a deterrent from entering politics. The findings indicated a lack of party support for women in politics in general and this was seen as actively discouraging women, both from entering politics and staying in it. The findings supported the need for parties and men to actively break the expectation of anti-family working hours by stepping up for childcare and care work themselves. They also underscored the need for men within parties to invest more time and effort to help female candidates to get elected, to stand with and behind women, and be pro-actively anti-sexist, anti-racist and anti-classist.

The findings supported the introduction of political gender quotas. However, the need for a mind shift on the part of male politicians was accentuated if women who are elected were to be treated as equal peers to their male counterparts, made to feel safe in political spaces and afforded the respect to do their jobs free from harassment, sexism and undermining. In the absence of this mind shift accompanying gender quotas, there was a view that women would continue to serve as mere 'props' for political parties for 'box ticking purposes'.

The findings indicated that political spaces were unsupportive of diversity with little to no party support for diverse women to get into politics, to stay in politics or to be made to feel valued or welcomed. This included women of colour, working class women, Traveller women, women with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ women. The findings indicated that the overrepresentation of mostly white men in politics can make political spaces unwelcoming and challenging for women to enter, particularly when women have intersecting identities.

Considering these findings, together with the extensive research which shows that society benefits from having more women and diverse groups in representative roles and at decision making levels, the following set of recommendations is offered:

Recommendations

Conduct training for all Politicians and Party Members

A code of conduct exists for members of Dáil and Seanad Éireann. However, this code predominantly focuses on conflicts of interest and financial matters but places no responsibility on members for their conduct towards each other. It is therefore recommended that this Code of Conduct be amended to include conduct between politicians. Training should be provided to all members on this Code of Conduct. This training should be mandatory and focused on conduct between politicians. This should have a particular emphasis on gender biases, stereotypes, attitudes, practices, behaviours, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, sexism and misogyny. This training should also be made a requirement for all political correspondents who report on women in politics.

Political parties should be required to have policies on sexual harassment, bullying, codes of conduct that are all available to the public. Funding should be allocated for each party to have a trained and informed welfare officer. It is also recommended that an independent body be set up to record and properly investigate the complaints of women experiencing sexism, harassment and bullying within political parties and in political spaces. This should include any experiences of racism, ableism, classism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Parties found guilty of this behaviour should be held to account.

The introduction of Hate Speech Legislation

Experiences of gender-based harassment and exclusion were frequently cited as common occurrences for women in politics throughout the research. Equally, it was cited as a major barrier to women entering politics. In this context, the introduction of Hate Speech Legislation is imperative to creating safe and inclusive political spaces for women and those who support them. It is, therefore, recommended that this legislation is expedited as a matter of urgency.

Cultural Competency and anti-Racist Training

The findings supported the need for cultural competency and anti-racist training for all politicians and party members to address the multiple obstacles to political participation faced by women arising from discrimination, prejudice, stigmatization, and lack of political recognition of the skills and talents of diverse women. This is necessary if diverse women are to be attracted to politics and if they are to be retained in politics. Political parties should be more proactive in this regard by, for example, issuing proactive invitations to

take part in local party activities / proactive member recruitment drives, engaging with different community groups at a grassroots level, especially for groups with low or no representation at local or national level and parties should go to the people, rather than expecting the people to come to the parties. People with vulnerable social identities need to be invited to participate and proactively welcomed and made feel safe.

Gender Quotas

The findings revealed how political spaces continue to be dominated by a male culture, with gender quotas not being taken seriously by parties, serving to meet the requirement of having them as opposed to supporting the equal participation of women in politics. It is recommended that political parties work towards 50/50 Gender Quotas for Local and General Elections. However, for this to be impactful it is imperative that political parties run women candidates in a serious and supportive way for winnable seats. Women running for election in political parties should be given the same support as every other candidate. Parties need to be held accountable when this does not happen and be adequately supported to see that it does. There also needs to be quotas introduced for seats won, as well as candidates run to ensure that parties start proactively supporting meaningful campaigns around women.

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming and equality should be incorporated into all policies, programmes, practices and decision making, both in political parties and at all stages in Government work, locally and nationally. This will assist with analysing the effects on men and women and ensure appropriate action is taken to promote gender equality.

Protect women from online and in person harassment, abuse and violence

Strengthen laws to protect women and victims of online violence and harassment. Perpetrators need to be held to account and punished for inflicting harm on another.

Research and focus needs to be on perpetrators of online violence against women and girls with the lens of prevention in mind. We know that they are predominantly men, and very often, men that we know. We need to start profiling these men - look at who they are, where they are from, what their background is, how old they are and crucially, why they are engaging in online violence and harassment?

We need to develop meaningful ways to hold social media and gaming platforms to account particularly for allowing people to set up multiple anonymous profiles. It needs to

be easier for Gardaí to acquire the contact information of people behind online trolls or abusive accounts so they can be investigated and prosecuted if warranted. Work with social media companies should be initiated particularly as it relates to transparency around their content reporting policies and policies on what constitutes abuse, harassment and online violence. Gender mainstreaming should be embedded in these policies. Sanctions for people engaging in abusive behaviour need to be meaningful.

A very large safety concern lies around the current requirement that the full addresses of people running for public office are in the public domain. Steps need to be taken to remove this requirement for all levels of government.


Final Thoughts

The overall purpose of this report is to give insight into the experiences of sexism of women working in political spaces and to provide recommendations on how to address the anti-democratic chilling effect on public participation of misogynistic abuse, and bullying online and in person, and suggest ways to make these spaces more welcoming, accessible and safe. Our Councils, Seanad and Dáil chambers should reflect the diverse society we live in, but right now, they do not. If women are to be change makers they need to feel safe, confident and welcome in political spaces.

We feel that a first step to this is to support them in building women-led campaign teams so that there will be women around them as they navigate political spaces. This is something that can be emulated by women's groups all over the country.
Finally logistical support with key campaign work like putting up posters is vital. One woman described how she was told to 'get her GAA friends to help her' to put up her posters. Even the advice given is highly gendered and exclusionary to many people who are not able-bodied men.

These recommendations call attention for the need to de-normalise and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to men's violence against women, men's sexism and abuse towards women, and the trauma that women have had to endure because of it. Violence against women in any form is not acceptable and should not be seen as normal or as one political representative said, 'par for the course' or 'to be expected' simply because women choose to enter political spaces. The recommendations underscore the need to shift

attention to the (mostly) men who are perpetrating the online and in person violence, harassment, bullying and abuse of women in political spaces. It is time to focus on who they are, what they are doing, why they are doing it and how to stop them, as opposed to what women are or should be doing to prevent their own dehumanization. This is imperative to making political spaces safe, inclusive and accessible for all.
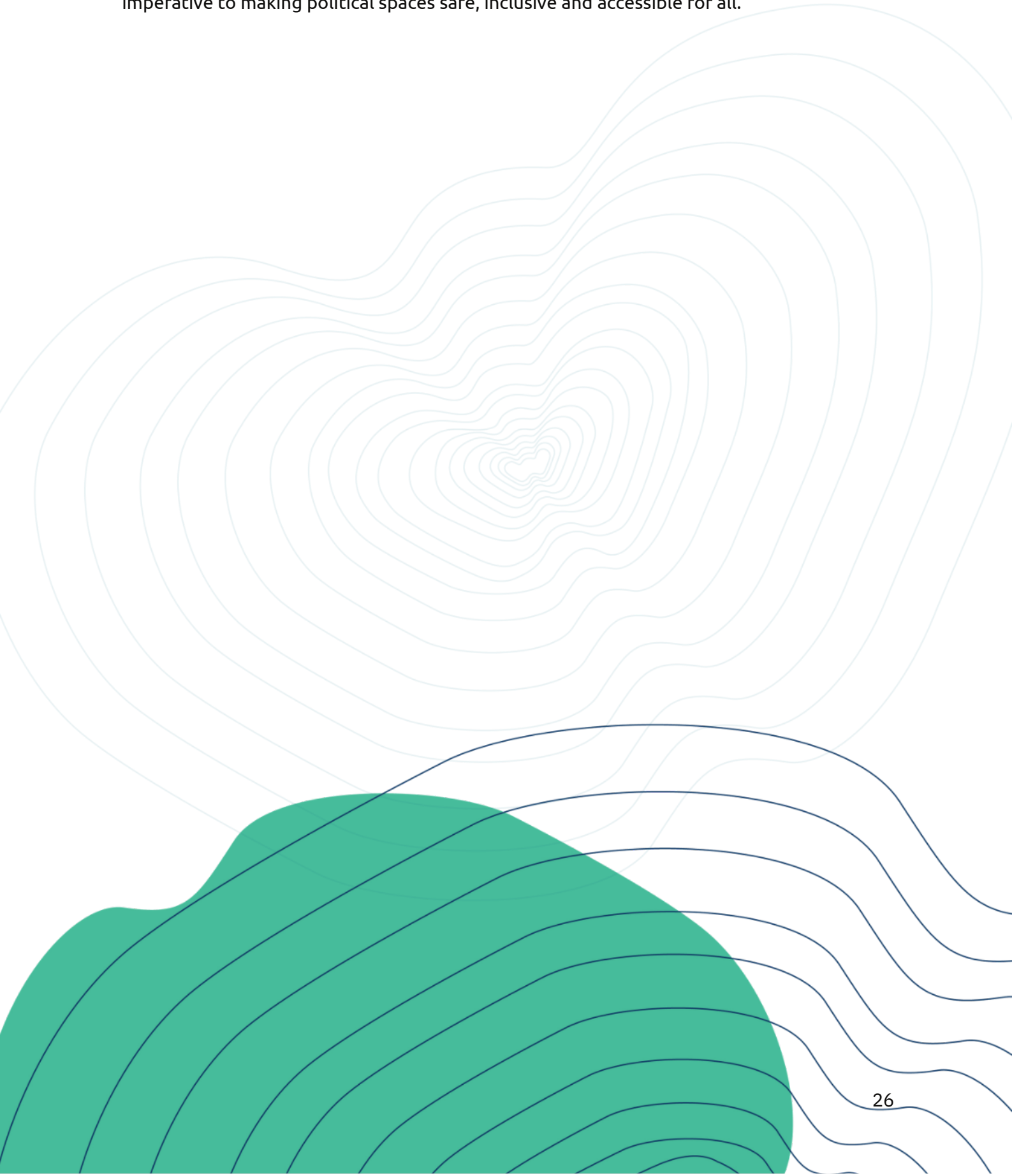
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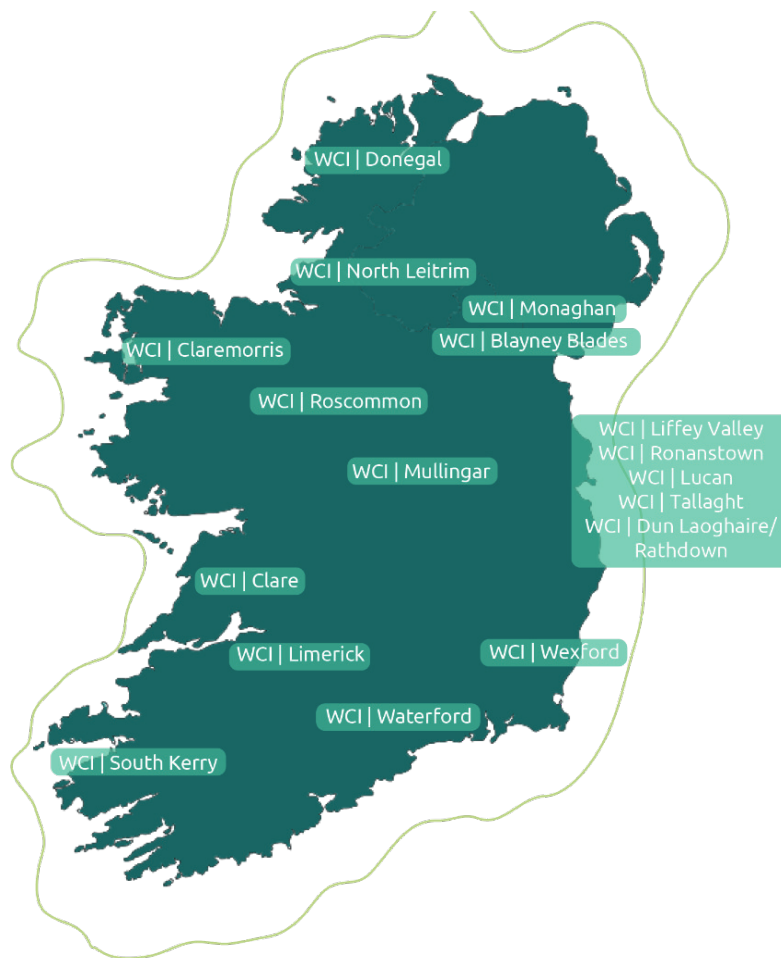
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