

Outline Research Proposal on the See Her Elected Programme

Introduction

In May 2019 Irish local government elections were held with 1,980 candidates vying for 949 council seats in all 31 county and city councils. Of those successful, just 226 were women. This meant that an entrenched pattern of the over-representation of men was set to continue for yet another local election cycle with the number of women county and city councillors not exceeding 24% of the total. This figure is skewed by the relatively more equal participation in local politics by women and men in the Dublin councils, and to a lesser extent the counties around the capital. In rural Ireland, the number of women in councils rarely exceed half a dozen. In Donegal, 4 of the 37 councillors are women. In Mayo just 2 of the 30 county councillors are women. In Longford a single woman was elected to a council of 18 members.

See Her Elected (SHE) was established in 2019 and employed a Programme Manager in January 2020 to design and implement a programme that would support women in rural Ireland into local politics. In this, SHE's first local election cycle, the programme has consolidated its position as a leading political innovation that connects directly with women in rural Ireland. With a mailing list of 1,215 women and currently supporting 140 women to run in the 2024 local elections, SHE has become an important political institution directly addressing the democratic participation of women in local politics in rural Ireland. While SHE's focus on demystifying local politics, voter engagement and innovative practices addressing barriers to participation of women sits within Strand D of the Commission's draft research programme (Education, Public Engagement and Inclusion), SHE would equally fit under Strand E (Bluesky/Curiosity-driven Research). In this outline research proposal, we provide an overview of how SHE set about mitigating structural barriers that women face in the male-dominated arena of local politics. In doing so, we draw out key research areas of interest.

See Her Elected

Scholarship addressing the under-representation of women in politics generally draws attention to demand and supply explanations (Maher and Farrell, 2021¹). While demand explanations look to how political parties and their gatekeepers favour particular attributes, of greater interest to SHE are supply side explanations which detail structural and cultural barriers as the reason for gender differences in the emergence of candidates. We concentrated on research findings about gender differences in how confident women and men are that they have the relevant skills and knowledge to be a viable candidate (Maher and Farrell, 2021). Central to SHE's approach to supporting women into local politics was addressing self-perceived weakness in political and election knowledge.

¹ Maher, M. and Farrell, T. 2021. Online Political Education in a Time of Crisis: A Case Study of the Development of an Online Learning Community with SHESchool. *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education*

Our strategic approach to achieving our goal of supporting women into local government in rural Ireland was to break the electoral cycle into distinct phases. We started in 2020 by addressing deficits in political knowledge with free online political education classes (SHESchool). These looked at concepts like active citizenship, political party membership, the function of a council, the job description of a county councillor, and the Public Participation Networks. 2021 saw a stronger focus on a practical support system for women with the publication of the *See Her Elected Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections*, and the first series of accompanying SHESchool election workshops. The focus of SHE's election workshops is getting campaign, canvassing and communications strategies in place as early as possible, with the Guidebook acting as a practical textbook. We also began to strengthen our working relationship with political parties, especially the regional organisers. Our support for the retention of sitting female councillors began with the delivery of bespoke training packages for female members of many political parties and caucuses, as well as being co-secretariat for the country's first regional caucus.

We continued to enrol women in a rolling series of election workshops throughout 2022 and introduced confidence and resilience training, and online safety. Mindful of the election cycle, in 2023 we added the topic of selection conventions to our election workshops and technical social media workshops to ensure a strong and targeted candidate communication strategy got underway as early as possible. Our grassroots approach means SHESchool is constantly evolving as it is shaped by responding to identified training needs. One example of this is the SHE Summer School which ran in July and August 2023 that specifically addressed questions on campaign donations and expenses, fundraising, staying safe online, using the Canva and Headliner apps and a comprehensive practical session on election posters.

All our workshops and classes are repeated at different times and on different days so that we are fitting in with women's lives and not the other way around. For example, our election workshops and clinics are once a month for an hour, but every month we hold the same workshop over 4 consecutive days allowing women to attend on Mondays at 8pm, Tuesdays at 10am, Wednesdays at 7am or Thursdays at 1pm.

Over the latter part of 2023 and into 2024 we brought the promotion of democratic participation and voter education to the fore. We extended our comprehensive schools roadshow and associated media coverage highlighting to students the role of local government in their lives, gender inequality in political participation, and the importance of voting. We worked with groups of women, especially migrant women, on how politics is organised in Ireland and how to vote. We created spaces for women to ask questions about politics and participating in local politics. Our PRSTV video² has been widely shared as a resource.

We work hard to maintain contact with women who have engaged with us so that See Her Elected is more than a once-off course. We have regular masterclasses and monthly clinics where women can continue to meet us online after their workshop series finishes. Women

² <https://www.seeherelected.ie/videos/>

also can book phone consultations with the SHE Team with questions or to brainstorm an issue, as part of our consistent support for women running. We deliver many of the classes and workshops ourselves, leading to a strong and sustained relationship between the SHE Team and the women preparing for the local elections. We aim for an informal communication style, openness, and political neutrality. We believe this has played a role in creating trust between SHE and women who are planning to run and those who are part of campaigns to support a woman running. Our innovative practices saw See Her Elected awarded the European Innovation in Politics award in December 2021.

Research Potential

See Her Elected has emerged as a critical actor creating a gateway for women into local politics in rural Ireland. This lends itself to an actor-orientated research project using qualitative methods of process tracing and interviews within a single case study. The development of the programme offers insights to patterns of interactions, organisational practices, building social relations, and an exploration of causal mechanisms. The perspectives of participants allow for a broad range of research themes to be considered. The SHE database provides a geographically, class and ethnically diverse sampling set of women predominantly from rural Ireland. Both candidates and campaign team members we are supporting can speak to their experience of SHE. Another sample with interesting research potential are the women who, having learned what was involved in both running and being a councillor, decided against running in 2024. Participants in our schools roadshows, SHESchool's Introduction to Politics and Introduction to Local Government can offer insights to themes of public awareness of local government, gender inequality in representation, and their knowledge of voting. And last but not least, the SHE Team have valuable insights into what women want and need in order to run in the local elections.

Contact

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