Written submission from the Social Democratic and Labour Party (WHC0080)

The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) welcomes this opportunity to submit evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee’s inquiry into Women in the House of Commons. We welcome the inquiry as the participation of women in the democratic process, particularly as elected representatives, is a matter of not only equality but of improving the performance of government. This has been demonstrated by a broad range of research which findings include:

- Women in public office are more likely to promote policies that address the socio-economic and political challenges facing disadvantaged groups.
- Countries where women are well represented in public office are proven to have a lower level of corruption which restores faith in government.
- Peace and reconciliation efforts with a higher rate of women involved are proven to be more effective and sustainable.

Representation of Women within the SDLP

The SDLP’s ethos is based on civil rights and the development of an inclusive society and the participation of women in elections and an increase in the number of women MPs, MLAs and councillors is an important aspect of that vision.

The SDLP is currently represented by three MPs in the House of Commons: Mark Durkan (Foyle), Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) and Margaret Ritchie (South Down). Margaret Ritchie MP has the distinction of serving as the first woman to lead a major political party within Northern Ireland, hold the role of Social Development Minister and she currently serves as the Chief Whip of the SDLP’s Parliamentary Group.

The SDLP has over a range of recent elections adopted a progressive realisation approach to achieving gender balance. For example in the 2014 local council elections, the SDLP leadership set a target of 30% of women candidates. This target was exceeded and 40% of SDLP local council candidates were women. The SDLP also proactively seek to include women in positions of leadership and is proud that the first female Nationalist Mayor of Belfast was SDLP councillor, and now MLA for North Belfast, Nichola Mallon.

However, despite these advances we are fully aware that there are a number of issues that women face that present barriers to running for election. These include but are not limited to care responsibilities; challenges in securing childcare and access to financial resources.

Development of a ‘Women’s Charter’
In terms of broader participation of women in public life the SDLP have long called for a Women’s Charter to provide support and remove the barriers that women face when attempting to participate in politics and public life. This includes but is not limited to:

1. Implementation of an **effective Gender Equality Strategy**, addressing among other issues the number of women in public appointments.

2. Introduction of **equal pay audits** to eliminate the gap between men and women’s earnings.

3. Introduction of a **Single Equality Bill**, to progressively harmonise protections against discrimination.

4. Development of **high quality, affordable childcare schemes** in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, the commercial child-minding sector and employers.

5. Implement and improve the **Valuing Carers Strategy**, research the levels and types of need including those caring for both the elderly and the young.

6. Support “**Women in Rural Communities**” groups, acknowledging the key roles played and addressing the challenges faced by women in rural areas.

7. Oppose **welfare reform changes** which would disproportionately affect single parent families and therefore hit women hardest.

8. Expand **protections for workers in peripheral or short duration work**, there is a vast body of research showing that women are more likely to be on zero hour contracts, minimum wages roles or short term employment.

9. Secure additional **financial support for students with dependants**, again, more likely to be female than male.

10. Improved access for third sector organisations to **state run courses and training events**

**Ensuring Parliament and Political Parties are open to all**
The SDLP also believe that political parties should be encouraged and facilitated in efforts to improve the representation of women in public office. These include areas such as:

**Capacity development**

The SDLP both centrally and through its Women’s group have provided bespoke and targeted training for our female members in all manners of party activity including running for office. The SDLP will continue to work with external groups and third sector organisations such as ‘Women For Election’ to develop individuals capacity and adapt our current structures to ensure a more representative slate of candidates.

*We believe that the content of such courses should be adapted and included within secondary level education.*

**Campaign Resources**

We have also in recent elections directed additional financial and campaigning resources towards female candidates to ensure a fair platform is provided. As many candidates for election often draw on their own resources we see this as connected to the pay gap and the wider discrimination women face in their professional lives.

**Candidate selection**

In advance of previous elections, the women’s group have undertaken projects to identify, encourage and support female candidates during the party’s selection process while for elections to internal positions the SDLP has adopted gender quotas in elections to the party’s Executive. As a party we have sought to formalise such projects within our constitution and will be discussing methods of approach at an upcoming constitutional conference.

*In terms of both campaign resources and candidate selection the SDLP have been analysing the approach laid out in the Oireachtas Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 which links levels of public subsidy to a party’s gender balance among candidates.*

**Caring duties**

The SDLP recognise that woman face additional barriers to participation in politics and serving in public office. Even though Northern Irish society is changing, women are still dominant in caring and family roles.

*As such we believe that parliament and the legislatures must ensure adequate care facilities and family-friendly working hours are provided to allow for full participation for women who also have caring roles.*

**Culture of politics**
In all aspects of the SDLP’s activity we seek to provide a respectful and inclusive culture. As such we have adopted strict guidance for what constitutes acceptable manner of debate. While issues of competing rights must be taken into consideration the SDLP are investigating progressive measures to combat abusive or discriminatory communication in the democratic conversation.

We call for measures including a multi-agency approach to tackling abusive communications and an expanded focus upon the criminal offense of grossly offensive communications.

UN Security Council resolution 1325

The SDLP are concerned that while the Republic of Ireland’s UNSCR 1325 implementation plans contain key points in relation to Northern Ireland, the British government has failed to live up to its obligations by adopting a position of not applying its provisions to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The SDLP believe the UNSCR 1325 presents an opportunity to advance real and meaningful participation for women in public and political life and broader conflict resolution processes.

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