# Communities Minister’s remark sparks gender respect debate at Northern Ireland empowerment conference



Recent events surrounding a female empowerment conference in Northern Ireland have sparked significant controversy, igniting discussions about gender respect in political arenas. Communities Minister Gordon Lyons found himself at the centre of this uproar after he made flippant remarks about the appearance of attendees, joking that "all the good-looking ones were put at the front." This comment drew immediate backlash, with many participants expressing their disgust and calling for accountability. In response to the outrage, Lyons apologised, stating that he was “sincerely sorry” for any offence caused.

This incident is emblematic of a broader issue within the context of women’s empowerment events. The comment itself seemed to undermine the very ethos of the conference, which aimed to uplift and empower women. Such remarks can contribute to a culture that values appearance over capability, further entrenching gender stereotypes. One attendee articulated her disappointment, emphasising that such comments detract from meaningful discussions about women's rights and societal contributions.

The climate surrounding gender representation in Northern Ireland politics has been increasingly fraught. In recent months, other instances of controversial displays have raised questions about the treatment of women in public spaces. Notably, on International Women’s Day, feminist activist Cara Park delivered a provocative speech at Stormont while barefoot and bare-chested. This unorthodox choice sparked severe criticism from some unionist politicians who deemed it "indecent and shameful." Park defended her actions as a form of self-expression and a call for freedom, illustrating the stark division in perceptions of feminist discourse.

Adding to the backdrop of these events, plans for a Miss Ulster beauty pageant at Stormont were scrapped after political leaders condemned the event, citing restrictive entry criteria that seemed reminiscent of outdated beauty standards and drawing unfortunate comparisons to the comedic portrayal of beauty competitions in the sitcom "Father Ted." Such cancellations indicate a growing sensitivity towards gender issues and an understanding that traditional beauty pageants often do little to empower women.

Moreover, the complexities surrounding who represents women at these events came to the forefront when male keynote speaker Billy Dixon withdrew from an International Women's Day event after criticism arose regarding his selection. While he expressed sadness over the backlash, his withdrawal underscored the ongoing debate about male representation in female-focused discussions. Advocates argued that the participation of men in women’s empowerment events requires a nuanced approach, particularly to ensure that it does not overshadow the voices of women themselves.

Lyons’ recent comments, paired with these other incidents, suggest that Northern Ireland is grappling with the dynamics of gender roles and the need for a more respectful discourse. Furthermore, the reactions to Lyons have set a precedent for political accountability as society continues to push for an environment that truly empowers women, free from objectification or dismissive remarks.

As discussions continue, it becomes increasingly clear that fostering an ethos of respect and equality requires a collective effort from politicians and citizens alike. Only then can the message of empowerment truly resonate and effect substantive change.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: (2)
2. Paragraph 2: (2)
3. Paragraph 3: (3)
4. Paragraph 4: (4)
5. Paragraph 5: (5)
6. Paragraph 6: (6)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/stormont-minister-apologises-after-outrage-over-good-looks-comment-at-women-empowerment-event/a2022543214.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/stormont-minister-apologises-after-outrage-over-good-looks-comment-at-women-empowerment-event/a2022543214.html> - Communities Minister Gordon Lyons apologized for remarks made at a female empowerment conference, where he joked that 'all the good-looking ones were put at the front.' Attendees expressed 'disgust' over the comment, leading to the apology.
3. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/topless-feminist-at-stormont-indecent-and-shameful-bare-chested-speech-sparks-unionist-anger/30078171.html> - Cara Park, a feminist from Londonderry, delivered a speech at Stormont on International Women's Day while barefoot and bare-chested. Her appearance sparked criticism from unionist politicians, who labeled it 'indecent and shameful.' Park defended her actions as a statement of freedom and self-expression.
4. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/organisers-cancel-stormont-beauty-pageant-after-outcry-from-politicians-1.1570561> - Plans to hold the Miss Ulster competition at Stormont were canceled following criticism from politicians. Concerns were raised over entry criteria that limited competitors to young women above a certain height and dress size, drawing comparisons to the 'Lovely Girls' contest from the sitcom Father Ted.
5. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/politics/male-keynote-speaker-saddened-as-he-withdraws-from-ni-councils-international-womens-day-event/a538850371.html> - Billy Dixon, a male image consultant, withdrew from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council's International Women's Day event after facing backlash for being chosen as the keynote speaker. Dixon expressed sadness over the controversy and highlighted issues like the exploitation of young girls and women by criminal gangs.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgvpnx5g3ko> - DUP Minister Gordon Lyons apologized for 'sincerely offending' Alliance MLA Kate Nicholl during a debate in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Lyons acknowledged that his remarks, which included telling Nicholl to 'sit down,' had caused concern and offered an apology.
7. <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2025/03/28/oneill-did-not-see-ex-press-officer-mcmonagle-at-stormont-event-report-finds/> - An independent report found that Northern Ireland's First Minister Michelle O'Neill did not see former Sinn Féin press officer Michael McMonagle at a Stormont event in 2023. The report concluded that O'Neill did not breach the ministerial code of conduct during the incident.