

Violence against women active in politics in the EU

A serious obstacle to political participation

SUMMARY

Women continue to be under-represented in EU countries at all levels of political decision-making as well as in political parties. The origins of this situation are complex, but one reason stands out: violence against women active in politics discourages many women from entering the political arena. Female politicians are exposed to two severe and intersecting forms of violence: political violence and gender-based violence.

Violence against people active in politics, whether men or women, is a major obstacle to the exercise of political rights and freedoms, and a serious violation of basic human rights. The increasing polarisation of liberal societies has been accompanied by rising violence against political stakeholders. However, this is only half the story. Violence against women in politics needs to be understood and addressed in a distinct manner. When political violence targets women just because they are women, when it takes sexist and sexualised forms and when it seeks to discourage women generally from taking part in political life, there is a gender dimension. This form of violence can also often be a backlash against women's greater presence in political life. Violence against women in politics takes multiple forms, from physical attacks to psychological and symbolic abuse, including sexual and sexist comments, online hate speech and sexual harassment, etc. Women surveyed tend to consider the impact of this type of violence significant in terms of psychological discomfort. They also feel less ready to defend certain positions.

At EU level, several measures seek to combat violence against women in politics, either indirectly or specifically. The legislative proposal for combating violence against women covers crimes that also affect politicians, while the proposal to criminalise hate speech would also address the issue.



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At the crossroads between two serious forms of violence

Politically motivated violence against people active in politics

Political [violence](#) is one of the most serious obstacles to the proper functioning of democratic systems and the exercise of political and civil rights by individual citizens. Usually understood¹ as the deliberate use of force or intimidation by state or non-state actors to achieve political objectives, political violence has been the subject of growing attention recently. Traditionally associated mainly with non-democratic regimes, many signs currently point to a worrying rise in politically motivated violence in liberal democracies, as the side effect of increased [polarisation](#) and deepening mistrust between competing political movements and world views. Such polarisation often goes hand in hand with an [overall deterioration](#) in the quality of democracy. The most worrying aspect is that a growing number of citizens of liberal democracies, particularly in the United States, the world's most powerful democracy, [endorse](#) political violence as a legitimate tool. One of the grievances that inspire such attitudes² is women's empowerment and a broader presence of women in politics, experienced by some citizens as an encroachment on traditional familiar norms and patterns of political debate and decision-making.

A striking feature of this trend is that it often targets individual politicians and elected officials. It is also more often perpetrated by individuals acting autonomously, inspired by radical ideas that mushroom in the online environment. A particular subset of political violence, violence against politicians and other people active in politics, has received comparatively less attention than other forms of political violence as a research topic. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project ([ACLED](#)) has started collecting data on physical violence against local government officials (including governors, mayors, councillors and other civil servants) worldwide. According to the most recent [ACLED report](#) on the topic, in 2022, 2 100 incidents of violence targeting local officials took place in the nearly 100 countries around the world covered by their survey. Such incidents included stabbings and shootings – over 50% of all reported events – but also riots and mob attacks, property destruction, bombings, and abductions. In the EU, according to [ACLED data](#), in the [period from 2020 to 2022](#), local government officials in Italy, in particular in the south of the country, were most affected by this violence (with 238 attacks, of which 90 % were against property), followed far behind by France (24 attacks) and Germany (11).

Efforts to tackle violence against politicians in France

Liberal democracies are not yet prepared to confront this phenomenon. France is one of the countries that has experienced a [steep increase](#) in attacks against elected representatives, particularly at local level, driven by grievances relating to policies implemented by the government, such as on migration, pension reform and climate protection. The country has recently taken a range of measure to protect its elected officials better. The French government has adopted a [plan to prevent and combat violence against elected officials](#) (July 2023), and established a Centre of Analysis and Action Against Violence towards Elected Officials ([CALAE](#)), which is in charge of coordinating a 'security package'.

France has also witnessed broad mobilisation to denounce the sexual harassment suffered by women politicians, often from their own colleagues. In 2016, following public accusations of sexual aggression towards French politicians, 17 former female ministers from a broad political spectrum published a call in the [Journal de Dimanche](#) to put an end to impunity for sexual harassment. In 2020, in the context of the #MeToo movement, some 20 women politicians from the Network of Locally Elected Women issued a [call](#) for a radical change in the political world to stop sexism against women. In a [statement](#) published by *Le Monde* in November 2021, 285 women from politics and the academic world called all French politicians suspected of sexual harassment to be excluded from public life. They also used the opportunity to launch the #MeTooPolitique campaign.

In EU countries, extreme forms of violence against politicians have been rarer than in other parts of the world ([Latin America](#) for example). However, there have been murders of elected politicians in recent years, namely Pawel Adamowicz – mayor of the Polish city of Gdansk – in 2019, Walter Lübcke – chair of the district government of Kassel in Germany – in 2019, and Jo Cox – a British Member of Parliament – in 2016, one week before the United Kingdom referendum on leaving the EU. All these murders were hate crimes driven by extremists opposed to the victims' liberal agendas.

ACLED data focus on physical violence, but it has become increasingly evident that non-physical forms of violence, such as verbal and written abuse and threats, stalking or harassment, and hate speech have a detrimental effect on politicians' activities. These more subtle forms of violence, and particularly those perpetrated online, are particularly prevalent in the EU. They all have a chilling effect on their victims, restraining their freedom of expression and motivating some to drop out of politics altogether.

Gender-based violence against women

Gender-based [violence](#) against women is a serious violation of the human rights of women and a severe form of [discrimination](#) that affects many [women in the EU](#). With the [completion](#) of the procedure for EU ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), to which it became a [party](#) on 1 October 2023, the EU has committed to adopting a gender perspective in all its measures to prevent violence against women, punish perpetrators and protect victims. The convention recognises several types of violence against women, namely: physical, psychological, sexual and economic, and thus also provides a framework through which to understand violence against political actors.

Understanding violence against women in politics

There are several important reasons to combine the two perspectives outlined above and look at politically motivated violence through a gender lens. Violence against women active in politics represents the intersection of two different, but similarly severe forms of violence. This amplifies its severity and its impact on individual victims. In terms of impact on political participation, violence against women in politics has serious consequences, as it discourages women in general from participating in politics, and therefore perpetuates gender imbalance and under-representation of women at all levels of political decision-making – a serious problem for any democracy that aspires to be inclusive. According to experts and international institutions, violence against women in politics³ can be identified on the basis of three elements:⁴

- 1) **motives:** violence against women in politics targets women because of their gender;
- 2) **forms:** it takes gendered forms such as sexist or sexual harassment and threats, or sexual violence;
- 3) **impacts and consequences:** it seeks to discourage women from participating in politics and thus reverse the trend towards women's empowerment.

Violence against women in politics can be categorised in the same way as gender-based violence: psychological, physical, sexual and economic; some also add the symbolic/semiotic form as a distinct fifth type of violence.⁵ One of the challenges inherent in analysing this type of violence is to define the scope of 'women in politics'. While clearly including politicians, many other categories can come under the umbrella of the term, such as political activists, electoral officials, campaign staff, parliamentarians' office staff and sometimes public officials working in political assemblies. Another important dimension is intersectionality with other possible grounds of discrimination, such as ethnic background, sexual orientation, or disability. Systematic collection of such data is restrained for legitimate reasons of privacy protection, but based on reporting by women politicians themselves (including [Cécile Kyenge](#), Italy's first minister of African origin, who later became a

Member of the European Parliament) it appears that intersectional discrimination is often associated with an increase in hate speech.

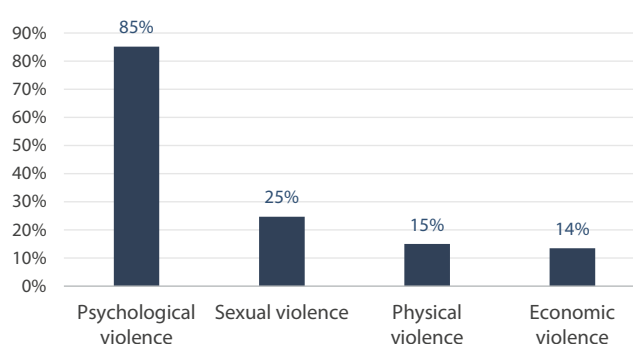
First attempts to theorise and tackle violence against women in politics

According to political scientist M. L. Krook, who has [researched](#) the emergence of the concept of violence against women in politics at international level, it has 'multiple, parallel origins' in women's movements in the world, in places such as Bolivia, Kenya and South Asian countries. The importance of considering the gender dimension of political violence first became clear in developing countries, where a broader presence of women in politics was met with strong resistance, driving extreme forms of violence, such as murder. Chronologically, a movement to counter political violence and harassment against women first emerged in the 1990s in Bolivia leading to the establishment of the [Association of Women Council Members and Mayors of Bolivia](#) (ACOBOL) in 1999. After receiving multiple reports of violence suffered by women politicians, ACOBOL became aware of the systematic nature of this phenomenon and proposed a legislative bill on gender-based political harassment and violence in 2001. The bill was finally approved a decade later in 2012, after multiple debates in the parliament. The process was tragically marked by the murder of one of its main proponents [Juana Quispe](#), a local councillor in the town of Ancoraimes. Bolivia's [Law No 243](#) of 28 May 2012 on combating political harassment and violence against women defines this type of violence and provides for legal sanctions. It considers that all acts that aim to exclude or prevent women from exercising their political mandate fall within its scope.

Gender based violence is [considered](#) to be one of the factors explaining the under-representation of women in politics. Data frequently reveal that women in politics are more exposed to violence than men, and such differences are due mainly to gender, and less to other factors such as political orientation. Violence against women in politics can take multiple forms, and forms that do not appear immediately political in nature can still have a serious political impact. For example, sexist and sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence that women in politics encounter frequently. Perpetrators also include party and parliamentary colleagues or superiors, as revealed by the two surveys presented in the next section. Even if they do not have a deliberate political goal, sexist comments, undesired sexual attention and even assault can have a discouraging effect particularly on young women in politics.

In order to properly understand and evaluate the severity and impact of such violence, data collection is vital. In October 2016, the Inter-Parliamentary Union issued a [report](#) entitled 'Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians'. The study was based on quantitative and qualitative data provided by 55 women parliamentarians from different age groups from 39 countries spread all over the world. The results showed that psychological violence affected **four in every five women** parliamentarians. Humiliating sexual or sexist remarks were the most widespread form of this violence affecting **65%** of those surveyed, followed by threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction (**44%**). The authors of sexist remarks were male politicians, both from the women's own party and from other parties. Roughly **one third** of parliamentarians participating in the survey had been subject to economic violence, one quarter to physical violence and **22%** to sexual violence. The respondents considered that the fact of being women was the primary driver of such violence, with **61.5%** believing that such acts were intended primarily to dissuade them and their female colleagues from continuing in politics.

Figure 1 – Types of violence experience by female parliamentarians in Europe (% of all respondents)



Data source: [IPU-PACE survey](#), 2018.

By contrast, only 41.7 % mentioned political rivalry as the motivation. Taking a position on controversial issues such as defending women's rights and human rights in general was a main driver of such violence against them. Youth and belonging to a minority group were among the demographic characteristics predicting an increased likelihood of violence. Violence and threats have the effect of undermining the parliamentarians' ability to fulfil their mandates and express their opinions freely, according to 38.7% of respondents having been subject to such acts, but the vast majority (80%) said that such acts only strengthened their determination to fulfil their political mandate.

In close collaboration with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in 2018 the Inter-Parliamentary Union conducted a further [survey](#) (see Figure 1), this time with a regional **focus on Europe**, which found an alarming level of sexism, harassment and violence against female members of parliament (MPs), confirming the results of the 2016 survey. The survey was based on interviews with 81 female MPs from Council of Europe member states (of which 91.4% belonged to a political party) and 42 parliamentary staff. Surveyed female MPs under the age of 40 were more frequently targeted by sexist and violent acts. One third of female parliamentarians stated that such acts had affected their freedom of expression and action during their terms of office making them more cautious and leading to them seeking to be less visible. Many cases are not reported (from 46.7 % in cases of physical violence suffered by female parliamentarians to 76.5 % in cases of sexual harassment). Parliamentary staff were also subject to violence to a significant degree, and complained about the lack of channels through which to address their complaints.

International standards

International human rights norms enshrine the right of women to live free of violence and participate unhindered in public and political life. The right to participate in politics is recognised in Article 7 of the 1979 United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)), and also in Sustainable Development Goal 5. In 2017, the CEDAW Committee updated its 1992 General Recommendation on gender-based violence. In the [new version](#), paragraph 14 – defining gender-based violence – now refers specifically to violence against women politicians 'Harmful practices and crimes against women human rights defenders, politicians, activists, or journalists are also forms of gender-based violence against women'.

The 2018 report to the UN General Assembly entitled '[Violence against women in politics](#)', by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences (then Dubravka Simonovic), marked the first systematic attempt to explain and assess this phenomenon in an official UN document. The report highlighted the fact that violence against women in politics had received little attention, despite being widespread and systematic. It also noted its chilling effect on young women wishing to enter politics. The report defined violence against women in politics as follows: 'Such violence, including in and beyond elections, consists of any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately... the aim of violence against women in politics is to preserve traditional gender roles and stereotypes and maintain structural and gender-based inequalities. It can take many forms, from misogynistic and sexist verbal attacks to the most commonplace acts of harassment and sexual harassment, much of it increasingly online, or even femicide'. In 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted [Resolution 73/148](#), whose Article 6 encourages national legislative assemblies and political parties to 'adopt codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, or revise existing ones, stating zero-tolerance ... for sexual harassment, intimidation and any other form of violence against women in politics'.

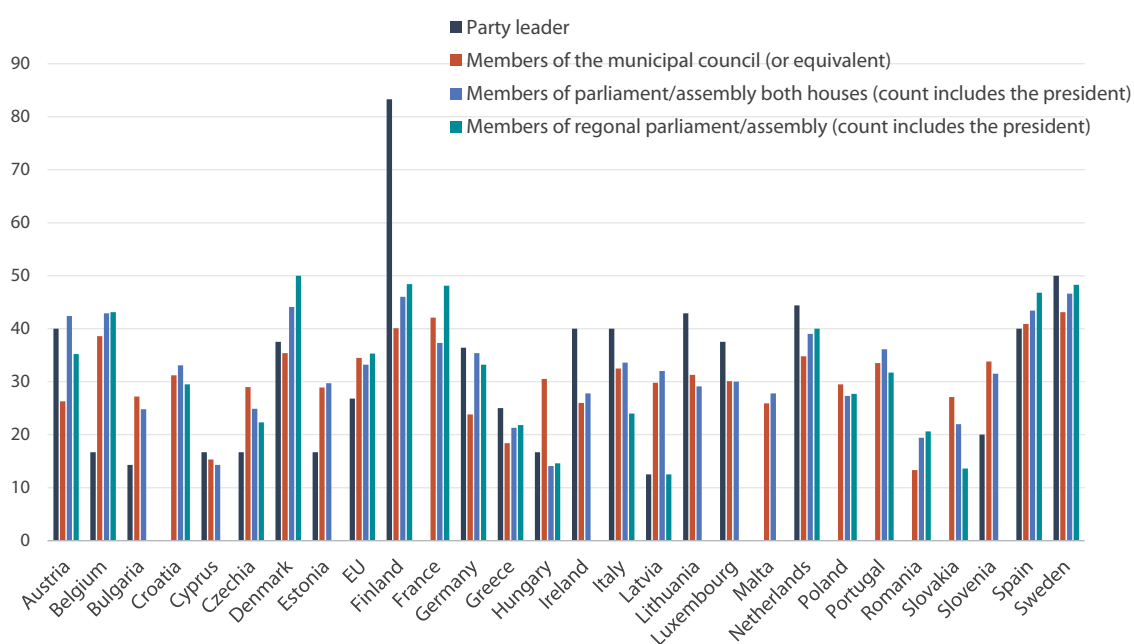
At **European level**, [Resolution 2274 \(2019\)](#) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) focuses on promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment. It highlights that sexism and violence against women in politics affect the very basis of democracy and undermine the representativeness and the legitimacy of elected institutions. The resolution stresses that this

phenomenon is often ignored as the 'price' women have to pay for political participation. In 2020, the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of the Council of Europe adopted [Resolution 459](#) on Fighting sexist violence against women in politics at local and regional level. It makes a series of recommendations to local and regional authorities in the member states of the Council of Europe, such as introducing or revising codes of conduct explicitly prohibiting sexist speech and sexual harassment in local and regional councils and assemblies, and establishing effective complaint and sanctions mechanisms. Another international organisation at European level that has addressed the issue is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has issued a [toolkit](#) with specific instruments for parliaments and political parties.

Situation in the EU

Violence against women in politics can only be properly understood against the backdrop of women's under-representation in politics at all levels in the EU, of which it is both a cause and an effect, in a vicious circle.

Figure 2 – Percentage of women in parliamentary assemblies and political parties in the EU



Source: EIGE, [Gender Statistics Database](#), 2023.

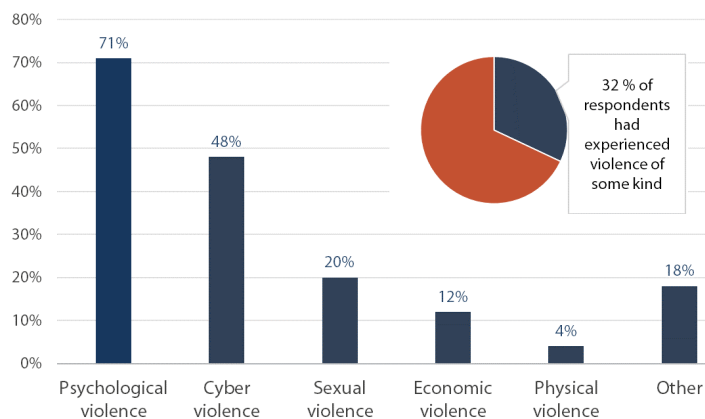
Data on violence against women in politics in the EU

There is no comprehensive set of data on violence against women in politics in the EU,⁶ but corroborating information from various sources points to a pervasive problem. Psychological violence, including attacks on women's private life, physical appearance or marital status, as well as symbolic violence seeking to marginalise women and make them feel incompetent are part of everyday politics in Europe. The multiple causes of this range from the perpetuation of sexual stereotypes, to a backlash against women's presence in politics, and resistance against women as newcomers when they are perceived to threaten deep-rooted interests, for example linked to [corruption](#). Electoral campaigns are an environment where gender-based harassment and hate speech proliferate. The online environment has provided a particularly fertile ground for acts of symbolic and psychological violence against women.⁷ Another driver is women's rise to top

positions in government. For example, **Finland**, a country that has witnessed a remarkable rise in the number and position of women politicians in recent years, provides a relevant case study. From December 2019 to June 2023, Finland was led by a coalition with a strong female presence: at the start of the term, all five leaders of the governing coalition parties, the prime minister and 10 ministers out of the 19 members of government were women. A 2020 [study](#) published by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence conducted an analysis of abusive messages targeting Finnish ministers on the social media platform Twitter, including from a gender perspective. The study concluded that female Finnish ministers received a disproportionate number of abusive messages throughout the monitoring period (March to July 2020) and that 'a startling portion of this abuse contained both latent and overtly sexist language, as well as sexually explicit language'.

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) recently conducted a Europe-wide survey on violence against women in politics among locally elected female politicians; 2 242 politicians (86 % of whom were local officials) in 31 European countries took part and shared their experiences of violence. Ninety-nine per cent of all respondents came from EU countries. According to the [results](#), 32 % of respondents had experienced violence, but only 28 % of those affected had reported it. Perpetrators faced consequences in only 22 % of cases. The vast majority of cases consisted of psychological and cyber violence, while physical and sexual violence was much less frequent (Figure 3). Half of respondents considered that the level of violence had remained constant, while the other half was divided between those who felt it was tending to decrease (20 %), or to rise (32 %).

Figure 3 – Types of violence experienced by female local politicians in the EU (% of those who reported having experienced violence)



Data source: [CEMR survey](#), 2023.

At national level, multiple surveys show the complex and pervasive nature of the phenomenon.⁸ Some local authorities and politicians' organisations have also started collecting data.

In **France**, an Elues locales [2021 survey](#) of almost 1 000 female elected politicians working mostly but not only in local government, showed that 74 % had been subjected to sexist remarks and harassment in the exercise of their functions. Physical violence had only affected 1 % of them. Eighty-two per cent of respondents said they had suffered from acts of violence committed by elected colleagues, compared with only 31 % who had been attacked by a member of the public.

In **Germany**, at [local council](#) level, several reports highlight the issue of verbal and psychological gender-based violence against women politicians, but they diverge with regard to the gender dimension. What is clear is that many politicians suffer insults and threats either online or in real life. According to a study² published by Heinrich Böll Stiftung, in the case of female politicians, the verbal violence includes sexist violence (gender-based and sexualised verbal violence) in more than half of cases, while this is not the case for men. A recent comprehensive study by the associations of cities and counties (Kommunales Monitoring Hass, Hetze und Gewalt gegenüber Amtsträgerinnen und Amtsträgern - [KoMo](#)) based on 2021 survey data showed that 46 % of elected officials had been the target of violence, mostly verbal or written attacks and hate postings, while only 4 % had suffered violence against their person or property, in the six months before the survey took place. Gender

played a role in less than 5 % of cases of violence reported. Women were slightly more often the target of hate posts than men.

At the level of **national parliaments**, according to a survey by ARD Political Magazine Report München (quoted in this [newspaper article](#)) 90 % of all female deputies in the **German** Bundestag have been the target of hate speech, 57 % of them on sex-related grounds. In 2020, a team from the University of Galway's Journalism and Communications discipline carried out a [study](#) among current and former female members of the **Irish Parliament** and female councillors from all major political parties on the topic of 'Online Abuse and Threats of Violence Against Female Politicians'. The results showed that 96 % of those interviewed had received threatening social media or email messages or 'hate mail'; while three quarters said they had been threatened online with physical violence. A quarter stated that they had been verbally abused in public.

An insight into the comparative situation at **national versus local level** was provided by a comprehensive survey on the topic of violence towards party members in **Germany**.¹⁰ It included 818 politicians, of whom 525 were women, with an elected mandate or public function at local, regional or federal level. Conducted in 2020, it showed that 40 % of women politicians had experienced some form of sexual harassment either verbally or through touching. Such experiences are more frequent at federal than local level, and are more likely to affect politicians under the age of 45. While more male than female politicians complain of attacks on social networks (74 % versus 60 %), women are more often the target of sexist remarks and insults (17 % of women compared with 3 % of men). In general, according to the survey, women are more affected by offline and online attacks than men.

In **Sweden** there is **systematic collection** of data on politicians at all levels. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) conducts a regular survey among politicians on the acts of violence and threats they face. This 'Politicians' Safety Survey' (PTU) measures the significance and consequences of harassment, threats and violence against elected representatives (including online sexual harassment and abuse of female representatives). The latest PTU for the period 2012 to 2022 (a [summary](#) in English published in 2023) shows that the proportion of women suffering violence is slightly higher than that of men: 31 % of female elected representatives compared with 28.3 % of males reported being victim at least once during 2022. Most acts of violence consisted of threats and harassment, with a total of 29.7 % of women and 27.3 % of men stating that they were the victim of this type of violence during 2022. A lower proportion, 5.3 % of elected representatives, stated that they had been the victim of physical violence, vandalism or theft. Women were more concerned about violence than men and more deeply affected by it. For 2022, 30.4 % of women stated that they had been affected by being abused or were concerned about it, compared with 20.7 % of men.

A [study](#) on **Ireland's** women politicians looks at the particular effects of the personalised nature of the country's politics and **electoral system** (single transferable vote) – which encourages politicians to cultivate their own vote separately from the party – on violence against women politicians. According to the study, women are particularly vulnerable to degrading talk and false rumours (which they are 2.3 times more likely to experience than men).

Tools for tackling violence against women in politics

The data also highlight an important issue in relation to violence against women in politics, namely that it is significantly under-reported. Most women politicians who suffer violence decide not to report it. Reasons include: pressure from political organisations wishing to preserve their good image; fear of appearing weak and in a stereotypically female situation; normalisation of such violence as the 'cost of women' entering into politics; concern about political careers; but also the absence of a complaint procedure or of an entity where to report, and mistrust in the effectiveness of complaint procedures. These reasons for under-reporting show the importance of putting in place mechanisms to assist and support those affected.

The OSCE [toolkit](#) stresses the importance of addressing violence against women in politics along four axes: prevention, protection, prosecution, and policy coordination, in line with the Istanbul Convention. Measures to ensure equality between women and men in the political field, as well as measures to combat violence against women in general, are considered crucial in preventing and reducing violence against women in politics. In addition to this general approach, the following specific measures are among those proposed by organisations¹¹ working on the topic.

In parliaments: draft or expand existing rules of procedure and codes of conduct to cover violence against women in politics; establish confidential complaint procedures; conduct official inquiries; set up dissuasive sanctions, including waiving parliamentary immunity; provide help, counselling, and legal and procedural aid; gather data and conduct regular surveys; organise anti-harassment training courses; report criminal offences to the police; conduct regular assessments of measures in place;

In political parties: reject publicly any form of violence against women in politics; recognise the issue in party statutes; adopt internal regulations, codes of conduct and zero-tolerance policies; create women's groups to share experiences; do awareness raising and organise training;

In political life: raise awareness through public statements, activism and campaigns; involve men; fight the culture of silence surrounding violence against women in politics; collect and analyse data; adopt legislative measures; provide access to justice; conduct effective investigation and prosecution; adopt dissuasive sanctions; provide emergency assistance and victim support;

In elections and electoral campaigns: ensure electoral bodies monitor violence against women in politics; make early warning systems for electoral violence sensitive to violence against women in politics; provide training for electoral stakeholders and other actors; organise civic campaigns to educate people on the risks of violence towards women in politics; improve access to political finance for women to ensure a level playing field; create networks of women parliamentarians; track cyber-violence.

Examples of parliamentary policies

National parliaments in EU countries¹² have, to varying degrees, established norms and mechanisms to prevent and tackle violence against women politicians and to enhance existing mechanisms to tackle gender-based violence.

In order to prevent **verbal attacks in debates**, most houses rely on their rules of procedures that contain more or less specific bans on aggressive and offensive language against their colleagues by politicians taking the floor in sittings, as well as sanctions in cases of non-respect. For example, in **Cyprus**, the [Rules of Procedure](#) of the House expressly state that all Members must behave and speak with respect in plenary and committee sessions and avoid the use of abusive language. In **Finland**, Section 31 of the [Constitution](#) of Finland (731/1999) (p. 7) states that representatives must conduct themselves with dignity and decorum, and not behave offensively to another person. In **France**, Article 70 of the [Rules of Procedure](#) of the National Assembly penalises certain types of behaviour in public sittings, such as attacks, insults, provocations or threats against colleagues. In the German Bundestag, members must respect the dignity of the house during debates ([Rule 36](#)). In **Hungary**, Act XXXVI of 2012 on the National Assembly (Parliamentary Act) sets out the types of conduct prohibited in plenary sessions of the parliament or in parliamentary committee sessions, such as using any term or language that harms the reputation of the National Assembly, the dignity of the sitting, or any person or group, in particular a national, ethnic, racial or religious community, (Section 46/B and D). It also prohibits the use of physical violence, the direct threat thereof, the invitation to exert physical violence or the obstruction of the conduct of others during the sitting of Parliament (Section 46/G). In **Luxembourg**, the [Rules of Procedure](#) of the Chamber of Deputies prohibit personal attacks during speeches (Article 37). In **Portugal**, there is a general rule, in Article 14(1)(e) of the [Statute of Members](#) (Law No 7/93 of 1 March 1993) that includes among duties of MPs the duty to 'respect the dignity of the Assembleia da República and its Members'. In **Romania**, the

rules of the [Senate](#) and the [Chamber of Deputies](#) prohibit any insulting or defamatory behaviour towards a parliamentarian or other senior official in plenary, committee or bureau sittings or outside them.

Many parliaments have adopted codes of conduct or codes of ethics for their members, which members are expected to endorse, for example if they wish to have access to leadership positions. These codes ban defamatory and offensive language and attacks against colleague during debates, or require, more generally, parliamentarians to adopt an attitude that does honour to their mandate and house. Such rules reinforce or complement obligations in rules of procedure (for instance [Estonia](#), [Croatia](#), [Cyprus](#), [Latvia](#), [Lithuania](#), [Poland](#), [Portugal](#), [Romania](#), [Slovenia](#), [Sweden](#)).

Some parliaments have established specific mechanisms to assist and advise parliamentarians on how to deal with **attacks, harassment and threats** outside of debates. In the **Austrian** parliament, an externally run and independent board staffed by two psychologists provides psychological counselling, while the parliament's legal service provides legal advice. In **Finland**, parliamentarians receive guidance on cyber-harassment including on information security and on how to deal with any harassment or intimidation, as well as psychological support from the medical service. For offences committed within the premises of the **German Bundestag**, the [police](#) at the German Bundestag are responsible, and are competent to receive complaints from Members. German deputies can also receive support from the Bundestag's administration in initiating judicial proceedings. In **Netherlands**, Members can complain to the chief security officer of the house, who can give advice and make contact with the police. In **Poland**, the Senate Chancellery provides senators with information and support on the necessary steps to be taken in the event of criminal threats, harassment, and other abusive behaviour. In **Sweden**, the introductory programme for parliamentarians, conducted by the Security Department of the Riksdag administration, includes a section on what MPs should do if they receive a threat.

To prevent harassment, and sexual harassment in particular, several Parliaments have established complaint procedures, bodies to deal with cases, counselling services, and training for both victims and potential aggressors. In **France**, members and staff can contact the [anti-harassment unit](#), which is composed of people from outside the National Assembly (lawyers, psychologists). This unit is responsible for conducting an in-depth analysis of the situation and referring the case to the institution's ethics officer. In **Spain**, in 2020, the Boards of the Congress of Deputies and the Senate approved the [First Equality Plan](#) of the Spanish Parliament. This plan provided for a [Protocol](#) for action against sexual harassment, gender-based harassment, and against all forms of harassment and violence in the Spanish Parliament. In the protocol's Article 3, the definitions of harassment specifically include among conducts that constitute sexual harassment those that are carried out through social networks or any other means of communication (such as the dissemination of documents, videos or images related to the sexual life of individuals). Article 4 states that a person affected by behaviour that may constitute harassment may report it internally and is entitled to obtain a response. In **Sweden**, members benefit from a sexual harassment support package.

EU policies

Combating violence against women has been among the priorities of the current Commission. Ongoing legislative proposals, as well as non-legislative measures in this field, highlight violence against women politicians as one area of particular concern. The European Commission recognises the chilling effect of online violence on women's participation in public life in the current EU [strategy for gender equality](#) (2020-2025), which sets out the general framework for EU action in this area. The [proposed EU directive](#) on combating violence against women and domestic violence highlights the negative impact of cyber-violence on women politicians, and asks for minimum EU rules concerning the offence of cyber-harassment. To step up protection of women politicians, the Parliament [has proposed](#) to make cyber-violence against public representatives, journalists and human rights defenders an aggravating circumstance – this position was endorsed by the Council of the EU in a political agreement reached at the beginning of February 2024.

Another Commission legislative [proposal](#), from 2021, to add hate speech and hate crimes to the list of EU crimes is indirectly relevant. It points to women as a specific group targeted by hate speech, and underlines the deleterious effect of such crimes on participation in public life. Despite broad support, the proposal has stalled in the Council owing to the absence of unanimity, needed in this case. If adopted, it would enable the Commission to table a proposal based on Article 83 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union for a directive on minimum rules concerning the definition of criminal offences and sanctions in this area of crime, to be adopted under the ordinary legislative procedure by the Council and the Parliament.

The recently adopted [Digital Services Act](#) is expected to address some of these issues by creating a safer online environment and defining responsibilities and accountability for a range of digital service providers. Very large online platforms and very large online search engines are now required to address risks relating to gender-based violence.

European Parliament positions and internal tools

The European Parliament has adopted various resolutions calling for an end to all forms of violence against women, and against women politicians. In its 2018 [resolution](#) on measures to prevent and combat mobbing and sexual harassment in the workplace, public spaces, and political life in the EU, it condemned all forms of harassment against female politicians. To tackle the problem, Parliament asked the Commission to expand the definition of illegal hate speech to include misogyny and to cover these crimes in the [EU Code of conduct on countering illegal online hate speech](#). Also in 2018, Parliament [condemned](#) the backlash against women's rights and gender equality and called for a strong focus on gender equality during that legislative term.

During the current term, Parliament highlighted the need to tackle online hate speech and cyber violence directed at female public figures, politicians and activists in its 2021 resolutions on the [EU Strategy for Gender Equality](#) and on [Closing the digital gender gap](#). It welcomed the steps already taken by the Commission and asked for further measures, including a new code of conduct for online platforms on combating online gender-based violence, harmonised legal definitions of cyber-violence and a directive to prevent and combat it. In 2021, it held a plenary [debate](#) on combating online abuse towards women in politics. In its resolution on [combating gender-based cyber-violence](#), adopted the same year, Parliament deplored the negative impact of gender-based cyber-violence on the participation of women in public life and debate and the fact that it leads to self-censorship. It expressed concern that the chilling effect thus created often spills over into offline reality limiting the engagement of young women in particular. Parliament's [resolution](#) of 1 June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and #MeToo reiterated that female politicians and those advocating for women's rights are particularly exposed to online violence and harassment.

The European Parliament has internal rules and procedures in place that oblige its Members to treat their colleagues respectfully and that ban any harassment on Parliament premises. According to [Rule 10](#) of the Parliament's Rules of Procedure on Standards of Conduct, Members must show each other respect, uphold Parliament's dignity and not harm its reputation. Offensive language is banned in parliamentary debates. Incitement to discrimination based, inter alia, on grounds of sex, is considered offensive language. The same rule obliges Members to refrain from any type of psychological or sexual harassment and to respect the [Code of conduct](#) annexed to the Rules of Procedure, which reaffirms the obligation for Member to act with respect for Parliament's dignity and reputation. The Rules of Procedure (Rules 175 and 176) lay down sanctions for breaches of the standards set out in Rule 10, ranging from denial of the right to speak and exclusion from sitting, or a reprimand, to temporary suspension from participation in all or some activities of Parliament for a period of between 2 and 60 days. Parliament has set up an advisory committee to deal with harassment complaints concerning members of the European Parliament; it focuses specifically on harassment against parliamentary staff. In July 2023 it also [decided](#) to establish a mediation service, and to introduce mandatory training on harassment prevention for MEPs.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In line with the World Health Organization (WHO) [definition of violence](#). G. Bardall, E. Bjarnegård and J. M Piscopo in '[How is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts](#)', *Political Studies*, Vol. 68(4) highlight the intentionality element of this definition.
- ² An analysis of propensity to political violence among US citizens shows that those who most oppose women's empowerment are also those most inclined to justify political violence, irrespective of political orientation, see R. Kleinfeld, '[The Rise of Political Violence in the United States](#)', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 32(4), October 2021.
- ³ According to the [ACER project](#), 'The study of violence against women (VAW) and gender-based violence (GBV) has often neglected the political dimension. Political and election-related violence, on the other hand, has been barely analysed from a gender perspective'.
- ⁴ These three elements have been highlighted by the [#NotTheCost](#) campaign conducted by the US National Democratic Institute. The 2018 report of the UN Special Rapporteur also underlines these three elements, the 'reason – form – objective' structure of violence. See also G. Bardall, E. Bjarnegård and J.M. Piscopo, '[How is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts](#)', *Political Studies*, Vol. 68(4), 2020, pp. 916-935.
- ⁵ According to the NDI project, unlike the other four forms, these acts are less about attacking a particular woman directly than about shaping public perceptions about the validity of women's political participation more broadly.
- ⁶ The existing surveys have different methodologies and scopes, and their results are hardly inter-comparable. Some include thousands of respondents, others are based on more detailed interviews with dozens of participants, who are not necessarily representative of the studied group.
- ⁷ Various studies suggest cyber violence is one of the most prevalent forms of violence against women politicians in the EU. See, for example, the 2022 [study](#) for the Spanish government, the [study](#) commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality on cyber violence and hate speech online against women, and the 2018 European Parliament [study](#) on bullying and sexual harassment in EU political life.
- ⁸ This selection of surveys is not in any way intended to suggest that the covered countries are particularly affected by violence against women in politics. These are simply examples that paint a rough picture.
- ⁹ S. Alin, Dr. S. Bukow, J. Faus and S. John, [Beleidigt und bedroht](#), 2021.
- ¹⁰ H. Lukoschat and R. Köcher, [Parteikulturen und die politische Teilhabe von Frauen. Eine empirisches Untersuchung mit Handlungsempfehlungen an die Parteien](#), October 2021.
- ¹¹ See UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, [Violence against women in politics](#), 2018; [OSCE toolkit](#) for violence against women in politics; United Nations Development Programme, [The Guide 'Preventing Violence against Women in Elections'](#), 2017; International IDEA, [Election Coverage from a Gender Perspective: A Media Monitoring Manual](#), 2011; US National Democratic Institute [recommendations](#); National Women's Council of Ireland, [Social Media Toolkit](#) for Irish political parties; French Observatoire des violences sexistes et sexuelles, [8 measures for the National Assembly](#); IFES [Violence Against Women in Elections Framework](#), 2016.
- ¹² This section is based mainly on information provided by national parliament chambers as part of an inquiry launched through the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) in June 2023.

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