



Women in politics and in the public discourse

What role can national Parliaments play in combating the increasing level of harassment and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians?

Background document for the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament

Alarming level of systematic sexism and sexual harassment towards women in national parliaments

1. Harassment and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians is certainly not a new phenomenon, but it has gained increasing attention in recent years, not least as a result of the #MeToo movement, which also led women politicians and parliamentarians to speak up about their own experiences.

2. The [regional study on Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians in Europe](#), which was jointly conducted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2018, as well as international reports on violence against women in politics such as the one prepared by the [United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences](#), reveal an alarming level of sexism, sexual harassment and gender-based violence against women in national parliaments and very worrying and widespread under-reporting of these acts. In addition, these reports shed light on the lack of adequate, victim-centered mechanisms to report violence and sanction perpetrators. Similar conclusions are also drawn by several other studies (see list “other information sources”).

3. The PACE/IPU Joint Study, which was based on confidential and voluntary interviews, shows that acts of sexism, abuse and violence against women are prevalent also in the parliaments of the Council of Europe member States. Some examples of these alarming findings include:

- 85.2 per cent of female MPs who took part in the study said that they had suffered psychological violence during their term of office;
- 46.9 per cent had received death threats or threats of rape or beating;
- 58.2 per cent had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks;
- 67.9 per cent had been the target of comments relating to their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes;
- 24.7 per cent had suffered sexual violence;
- 14.8 per cent had suffered physical violence;
- Female MPs under the age of 40 were more frequently subject to psychological and sexual harassment;
- Female MPs active in the fight against gender inequality and violence against women were often singled out for attack.

4. It is equally alarming that the perpetrators of harassment and violence included both political opponents and colleagues from the women's own party, as well as ordinary citizens. And, that there is a low level of reporting of these acts:

- only 23.5 per cent of female MPs and 6 per cent of female members of parliamentary staff who had been sexually harassed had reported the incident;
- only 50 per cent of women MPs who had received threats of physical violence had reported the incidents to the police, the security department in the parliament or another department.

5. One of the main reasons for underreporting may be a lack of reporting mechanisms or support services in most of the parliaments to which a victim can turn in the event of harassment or violence. In addition, internal parliamentary policies aimed at eliminating harassment and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians are lacking.

6. Furthermore, there are no data or indicators for measuring the prevalence of harassment cases and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians, including during elections. Partly due to this, these cases are not considered widespread or structural.

7. The study focused on sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians and female members of parliamentary staff. However, it is important to bear in mind that men, notably those serving as parliamentary staff, are and can be victims of harassment. Due attention should be paid to this in future work and studies.

Chilling effect on women's political participation

8. Equal participation of women and their access to positions of political leadership and decision-making at all levels are fundamental for achieving gender equality and to ensure a well-functioning democracy. Women's rights to participate, both as voters and candidates, on equal terms with men, are protected under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Articles 7 and 8). On average [26% per cent of parliamentarians in the Council of Europe member States are women](#). This is far from parity and does not bode well for achieving the sustainable development goals for a planet 50/50 by 2030.

9. Achieving balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making is one of the priorities of the Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023. It states that women's under-representation in public and political life remains a critical issue and undermines the full functioning of democratic institutions and processes. Male domination of political life and activities, decision making and decision-taking processes, leads to men setting political priorities. Political culture continues to be structured around and dominated by male behavior and experience.

10. Multifaceted barriers hinder women's entry and full participation in political life. Harassment and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians constitute one of many such obstacles. While both women and men may experience violence, harassment and bullying in politics, when such acts target women they are based on their gender and take gender-based forms, such as sexist comments and threats, sexist hate speech, sexual harassment and sexual violence, including threats of rape. The IPU/PACE Joint Study reveals the scale of such acts.

11. Sexism and harassment of women is already prevalent in election contexts. This electoral violence is sexist in nature and at times involves threats to women candidates' personal security or that of their families, as well as attacks on their moral and human dignity.

12. Online harassment, both misogynist and sexist, is on the rise. While the internet is not at the origin of harassment, it has contributed to propagating and perpetuating gender stereotypes, sexism and sexist hate speech, thus bringing a new and complex dimension to efforts to tackle this challenge and curb its negative impact.

13. Normalisation and toleration of harassment and hate speech against female politicians and parliamentarians discourage women from being politically active and restrict or prevent their political participation – both as individuals and as a group. When combined with stereotypes associating women's role rather with the private, domestic and family sphere and home they have a chilling effect on women's participation and contribution to society, deny them the right to access leadership positions and impair their ability to fulfil their elected mandate.

The way ahead towards a harassment-free parliament

14. The action to be taken to reach a harassment-free parliament and environment in which women are fully empowered to participate does not require major investment. It requires clear political commitment at the highest political level, and especially from the Speakers of the Parliament, and a change of mind-set.

15. The following actions are based on the recommendations of the IPU/PACE Joint Study report and good practice identified at the level of national parliaments. They include but are not limited to:

- Create a zero-tolerance environment for sexist behaviour, psychological and sexual harassment and gender-based violence in parliament including through implementation at parliamentary level of Council of Europe standards, in particular the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on preventing and combating sexism, Assembly Resolution 2274 (2019) on Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment and other relevant regional or international instruments;
- Set up appropriate complaints and investigation mechanisms which are confidential, fair and responsive to victims' concerns;
- Ensure that victims of harassment and assault are aware of and have access to assistance and advice services that are confidential and put the victims' rights at the centre;
- End impunity for perpetrators by introducing and applying disciplinary sanctions. In this context, consider reviewing immunity rules which afford immunity from prosecution to members of parliament for sexual harassment and violence against women;
- Design and run training programmes for all persons working in parliament on issues related to respect in the work place, sexism, harassment and programmes and mechanisms in place to tackle these issues;
- Conduct surveys on the prevalence of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament and take action to remedy the situation;
- Initiate, support and implement policies and legislation to ensure parity in political and public life;
- Encourage and provide incentives to political parties to ensure better representation of women in decision making;
- Encourage political parties to establish codes of conduct and take action to challenge gender stereotypes, patriarchy, misogyny and the culture that tolerates and condones acts of violence and harassment of women in political life;
- Engage proactively men in all activities to prevent and combat sexism, harassment and violence against women. Consider compulsory training on workplace codes of conduct and ethics;
- Build partnership and work with the media to promote non-sexist representation of women and tackle harmful gender stereotypes and sexism;
- Initiate, promote, and encourage education programmes from a very young age to foster a culture of tolerance, non-discrimination, equality, respect and tolerance.

➤ **Questions for discussion:**

- *How has your parliament clearly stated that harassment and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians are unacceptable? Does it have a code of conduct for members which clearly condemns sexual harassment and sexist hate speech?*
- *What are the complaint mechanisms in place to prevent and sanction harassment and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians?*
- *Is your parliament collecting data and conducting surveys to measure prevalence of harassment and hate speech against women politicians and parliamentarians?*
- *Does your parliament organise and promote public debates to raise awareness of the issue of harassment and hate speech towards female politicians and parliamentarians and its consequences on individual, political and public life and democracy?*
- *Do you have any good practice in actively engaging men in efforts to tackle harassment and hate speech towards female parliamentarians?*

➤ **Useful reference standards:**

1. Council of Europe [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence \(Istanbul Convention\)](#)
2. [Recommendation Rec \(2003\) 3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making](#)
3. [Recommendation CM/Rec \(2019\)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States to prevent and combat sexism](#)
4. Assembly [Resolution 2290 \(2019\)](#) and [Recommendation 2157 \(2019\)](#) on Towards an ambitious Council of Europe agenda for gender equality
5. Assembly [Resolution 2274 \(2019\)](#) and [Recommendation 2152 \(2019\)](#) on Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment
6. [Assembly Resolution 2101 \(2016\) on Systematic collection of data on violence against women](#)
7. [Assembly Resolution 2111 \(2016\) on Assessing the impact of measures to improve women's political representation](#)
8. [Assembly Resolution 2084 \(2015\) on Promoting best practices in tackling violence against women](#)

➤ **Other information resources:**

1. Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians, IPU Issues Brief, October 2016, <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf> (presentation of main results: <http://mlkrook.org/pdf/Filion.pdf>)
2. Report of the Cross-Party Working Group on an Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy: <http://qna.files.parliament.uk/ws-attachments/838704/original/Working%20Group%20on%20an%20Independent%20Complaints%20and%20Grievance%20Policy.pdf>
3. Bullying and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces and in political life in the EU, European Parliament Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2018 (pages 38-42)
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604949/IPOL_STU\(2018\)60494_9_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604949/IPOL_STU(2018)60494_9_EN.pdf)
4. Expert Group Meeting Report & Recommendations on violence against women in politics, 8-9 March 2018
<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/ViolenceAgainstWomeninPoliticsReport.pdf>
5. National Democratic Institute, No party to violence: analysing violence against women in political parties
https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_No_Party_to_Violence_ReportFinal.pdf
6. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics: Violence, Politics and Gender, Gabrielle S. Bardall, February 2018
https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/violence_politics_and_gender.pdf
7. Understanding Sexism and Sexual Harassment in Politics: A Comparison of Westminster Parliaments in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada, Oxford Academic, Social Politics, Cheryl N. Collier and Tracey Raney, August 2018
<https://academic.oup.com/sp/article-abstract/25/3/432/5076125>
8. Sexism, women and Australian politics, Dr Avery Poole, University of Melbourne, July 2018
<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/sexism-women-and-australian-politics>
9. The effect of media sexism on women's political ambition: evidence from a worldwide study by Amanda Haraldsson, Department of Political and Social Sciences, the European University Institute, San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy and & Lena Wängnerud, April 2017 (Pages 525-541) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2018.1468797>