ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS IN THE OSCE REGION: TOOLKIT

Tool 6

Experiences and Coping Strategies of WOMEN IN POLITICS

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Addressing Violence Against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region Toolkit

Tool 6: Experiences and Coping Strategies of Women in Politics

EMBRACE CHANGE FOR GENDER EQUALITY

OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights ODIHR

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Addressing Violence Against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region
Tool 6: Experiences and Coping Strategies of Women in Politics

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Toolkit for Addressing Violence against Women in Politics

Violence against women in politics is a human rights violation, a barrier to women's political participation and a serious challenge to democracy, peace and security in OSCE participating States. There is a need to respond to and eradicate its different manifestations in all areas of political life.

The 2018 OSCE Ministerial Council Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women acknowledges that "women engaged in professional activities with public exposure are likely to be exposed to specific forms of violence or abuse, threats, and harassment, in relation to their work." It "encourage(s) all relevant actors, including those involved in the political process, to contribute to preventing and combating all forms of violence against women, including those engaged in professional activities with public exposure and/or in the interest of society, by, inter alia, raising the issue in public debates, and developing awareness-raising initiatives and other appropriate measures, also considering the chilling impact of such violence on young women."

This Toolkit aims to raise awareness and strengthen the knowledge and capacities of OSCE participating States to implement effective measures for addressing and responding to this type of violence. In 2022 five tools were published:

ODIHR's Toolkit for Addressing Violence Against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region

- **Tool 1 – the Introduction** defines violence against women in politics and describes solutions for effective prevention, protection of victims, prosecution of perpetrators, and coordination of policies.
- **Tool 2 - for Parliaments** provides data and examples of promising practices to guide parliaments towards measures which address violence against women in parliaments and beyond.
- **Tool 3 - for Political Parties** assists political parties in taking internal steps to tackle violence against women within their structures.
- **Tool 4 - for Civil Society** explores the role that civil society and women's movements can play in combating violence against women in politics.
- **Tool 5 - for Women in Politics** is a guide for women affected directly or indirectly by such violence about how to seek protection, remedy and support.

Tool 6 complements these five tools by presenting the strategies used by individual women politicians to respond to and cope with such violence. Documenting these coping mechanisms may be a valuable form of support for women politicians dealing with violence against women in politics, especially where institutional mechanisms are ineffective or absent. Sharing women's experiences should also complement efforts already in place to address this problem.

1. Introduction

Violence against women in all its forms is perceived by the OSCE as one of the most pervasive impediments to women's full, equal and effective participation in political and public life. Yet it is prevalent across the OSCE region, sometimes combining with other forms of exclusion based on age, ethnicity or disability, among other inequalities. Women are targeted with violence not only for their political views. The aim is to shorten the length of women politicians' careers, reduce their impact on public policy or prevent aspiring women politicians from engaging in politics and decision-making altogether. Violence against women in politics is a human rights violation, a barrier to women's political participation and a serious challenge to democracy, peace and security in OSCE countries. Violence is not a price women should have to pay in order to enjoy their political and civil rights. There is a need to respond to and eradicate its different manifestations in all areas of political life. In addition to the work of institutional mechanisms, knowing more about how individual women politicians remain resilient and cope with such violence is integral to responding effectively.

In 2022, ODIHR published the *Toolkit for Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region*,[1] which made recommendations for legislators, governments, parliaments and political parties, alongside guidance for civil society actors and women politicians affected by violence. The toolkit is based upon international standards and OSCE commitments. It consolidates definitions and includes examples of promising practices from a variety of participating States on how to prevent violence against women in politics. The toolkit aims to raise awareness and strengthen the knowledge and capacities of OSCE participating States on implementing effective measures for addressing and responding to this phenomenon.

Tool 6 focuses on the **experiences and coping strategies of women politicians**. It starts with a brief overview of the definition of violence against women in politics and what this new tool brings to the toolkit. Chapter 2 summarizes the design and scope of the research for this tool, including measures taken to ensure the safety and well-being of interviewees. Chapter 3 analyses what participants said in their interviews, focusing on their experiences of violence, the impact of the violence, their coping strategies, support and accountability mechanisms, and their advice to other women. Chapter 4 offers

1 Toolkit for Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region, OSCE/ODIHR, 27 November 2022.

recommendations for action, at both individual and institutional levels, to help prevent and punish acts of violence against women in politics.

WHAT IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS?

The Toolkit defines violence against women in politics as "any gender-based act or threat of violence intended specifically to obstruct women's political participation because they are women. It is not simply a form of physical attack on political or electoral rivals, whether women or men, for the purpose of a political win. Rather, it is a specific 'phenomenon involving a range of harms to attack and undermine women as political actors (…) and exclude them as a group from public life'."[2]

This definition implies a discriminatory element. Violence against women in politics is committed against women because they are women. In turn, it has a negative impact on women's political participation, democratic processes, human rights and gender equality. Violence against women in politics is widely recognized to take multiple forms. Four types of violence appear in international instruments: physical, psychological, sexual and economic. Academic research points to a fifth category, semiotic violence, which typically uses words and images to discredit and disparage women in politics.[3]

MAPPING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES

Tool 6 builds on the first five tools by focusing on the experiences and coping strategies of women politicians. It maps the experiences of women in the OSCE region in relation to different types of violence against women in politics and finds evidence for all of them. Psychological violence, in the form of online harassment, and semiotic violence, in the form of gendered disinformation, are particularly prevalent in the region. Nearly all the women interviewed reported having experienced these types of violence. Many have also faced various forms of physical, sexual and economic violence. The negative impact of this violence has been both personal and professional. It has affected women emotionally, causing them, for example, to change their routines and worry about the safety of their loved ones. It has also influenced their behaviour in political spaces and some have even thought about leaving politics.

Given the prevalence of violence against women in politics and the steep toll paid by women in both their personal and professional lives, this tool focuses on documenting the coping strategies used to survive and thrive in the political world. The interviews gathered insights on how women responded to the violence, asking whether they had told others

2 Violence against Women in Politics, Tool 1, Introduction, OSCE/ODIHR, 27 November 2022, pp. 8 and 11.

3 Mona Lena Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

or taken any actions, and whether they had developed any physical or mental strategies to mitigate the effects of the violence. The research also aimed to understand what forms of support and accountability mechanisms are available to women in the OSCE region. The interviews provided mixed evidence on the presence and effectiveness of such mechanisms, highlighting the need for more deliberate interventions to ensure that women can participate in politics fully, freely and safely. When asked for any advice they would give to other women on how to navigate violence, most interviewees agreed that it was important not to accept the violence as a 'normal' part of political life.

2. Research design

ODIHR invited more than 50 women politicians from OSCE participating States to take part in the research, to ensure an accurate reflection of the trends in violence against women in politics across the OSCE region. In all, 19 women from 13 countries agreed to be interviewed. Most were current or past Members of Parliament (MPs), but they varied widely (e.g., in terms of, age, level of political experience, party ideology, government/opposition).

The interviewees came from Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (2), Canada, Croatia, Georgia, Finland (2), Kyrgyzstan, Latvia (2), North Macedonia (3), Poland, Serbia (2) and Slovenia. Fifteen were serving or former MPs, while the other four were two serving government ministers, one local councillor, and the head of a political party's women's organization. Some of the MPs also had experience in local politics, government ministries or the European Parliament, and several had worked, or were working in civil society organizations.

At the time of the interviews, conducted between July and December 2024, the women were aged 25 to 83. Six were under 40, ten were in their 40s or 50s, and two were over 60. Eleven of the MPs had sat in parliament for two or more mandates, while four were currently in their first term. In terms of ideology, 12 of the women came from parties on the 'left' of the political spectrum, two were members of 'centrist' parties and five represented parties on the 'right'. Nine of the women were from parties in government at the time of interviewing, while ten were from parties in opposition. The women were also diverse in terms of their identities, with at least three women from racial or ethnic minority groups (one of whom was from a religious minority).

The interviews were divided into four parts using a common interview template. (See Annexe for the full list of questions).

» The first part of the interview gave interviewees a brief introduction to the project and a reminder about research ethics.

» The second part focused on their **experiences of violence**, with questions focused on the five types of violence — physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic — as described in Tool 1 of the ODIHR *Toolkit on*

Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region.[4] To make the questions more accessible, they were phrased in a way that did not use this specific terminology but referred instead to acts under each of these five categories. For example, rather than asking about psychological violence, the questions referred to experiences with online harassment, hate speech, intimidation and threats. This was particularly important for questions about economic and semiotic violence, which are generally less familiar concepts.[5] The question on economic violence asked about property damage and other forms of vandalism. The question on semiotic violence focused on disinformation campaigns, asking interviewees, for instance, whether their images had ever been photoshopped in negative ways, or if they had been the subject of fake news stories involving misleading personal attacks. Respondents were then asked how these incidents had affected them, individually and in relation to their loved ones.

» The third part of the interview addressed **coping strategies**. These questions aimed to understand how interviewees personally dealt with the violence, and whether they sought or received any support from other actors. On a more individual level, respondents were asked if they had ever told anyone about the incidents or taken any action in response, as well as whether they had adopted any strategies to cope with the violence. On a more institutional level, the interviewees were asked whether they had received support from others, whether through formal or informal mechanisms, and what further measures might be needed to help women better deal with violence connected to their political work.

» The fourth part focused on the **impact** of violence against women in politics. Interviewees were asked about the political impact of the violence; whether it had affected their political work, and whether it had ever led them to consider leaving politics. The questions also probed whether the violence had made an impact beyond politics, changing the women's personal lives in any way, including their personal relationships. Finally, they were asked what advice they would give to other women on how to deal with violence against women in politics.

Particular care was taken to ensure the safety and well-being of the women throughout the interviews, recognizing that it can be difficult to talk about experiences of violence. Some requested anonymity for some of their answers.

4 OSCE/ODIHR, Tool 1, Introduction.

5 For a more detailed discussion of these forms of violence, see also Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*.

3. Comparative insights

3.1. EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

All nineteen women[6] reported experiences of violence against women in politics. Indeed, a common thread throughout the interviews was just how common such violence is.

> "It is in an overwhelming majority of cases. I've never met a colleague who hasn't gone through similar experiences."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Interviewees varied, however, in terms of the types of violence they faced and how these incidents affected them personally. Notably, several emphasized that, on top of politically-based attacks, some had experienced violence motivated by other elements of their identity, often combined with gender. For example, several women shared that the attacks focused on their status as young women in politics.

> "There are always some kind of comments, let's say in my social media, (….) there are people who are giving comments about me being very young, me being inexperienced."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "They are writing that your family should limit your access to politics because you are too young. I'm 27 years old. [They say] I am too young to participate in political activities."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

Some noted, however, that this treatment changed as they grew older and more experienced and built up their confidence in how to respond.

> "I would say that the situation in my first term and the situation in the second term regarding gender really differs. In my first term, which was two years ago now, I was often harshly attacked just because of being a woman and young; because I was the youngest female MP."
>
> Sona Ghazaryan, MP, Armenia

6 In order to ensure safety and well-being, some quotes are anonymous and provide limited information on the speaker's background.

> When I was younger, I didn't know how to cope. These days I would just, you know, let the person know that that's not okay and then walk away."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

In other cases, the violence referred to their racial and ethnic identity.

> I had a message where someone told me that I should be killed because I'm a stupid [racist slur]. It is constant, and it has been going on since I got active, not even in politics, but in organizations. As long as I have been using the Internet, there has been harassment due to my gender and due to my race."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> I was announced as Minister for Labour and Social Policy on 1 January 2020, and on 4 January 2020 the verbal violence started. Anti-Semitic outbursts, which were not seen before in this country. They were hitting a soft spot, something that I cannot 'correct' about myself. My religion. And it was so brutal."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

> For my political enemies, I'm not only a woman, not only Marinika. I am a Romanian from [the autonomous province of] Vojvodina … and I was accused of being a pro-separatist. I'm certain if I was [ethnically] Serbian, I would not be targeted as I was."
>
> Marinika Tepić, MP, Serbia

Being an open advocate for feminism and gender equality also made some women a greater target of violence.

> It was (…) five of us MPs that were speaking on behalf of the law for the legal recognition of gender identity. I think that was the peak of hate speech against us, because it was such a well-organized campaign. And I think that we were the most unpopular faces in that time."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

> You pay a big price for wanting to work for equality. If I was a Black woman talking about electricity prices, or if I was a Black woman acting as a token of extreme right people, then I would be safe."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

Physical attacks

Physical attacks tend to be less common than other forms of violence against women in politics. Nonetheless, several respondents identified incidents where they faced physical violence in the course of their political work.

> "Once when I was giving out leaflets, a man came and tried to start pushing me, but luckily there were other people around me. We have a rule that you are never allowed to do any kind of street campaigning on your own. That is exactly for that that reason. (…) One person started shoving me. In other cases, people have taken leaflets out of my hand and thrown them on the ground."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "[A ruling party activist] came with a box of chickens and tried to interrupt me. It was raining that day. I mention this because I think that the umbrellas helped save me in this attack. At one moment he opened some kind of box. He takes a few chickens and starts to [throw them] at my face. And the umbrellas; the people's reaction was very good."
>
> Marinika Tepić, MP, Serbia

One interviewee reported a disturbing physical attack on one of their family members.

> "My son was severely beaten in 2018. It was a few days after my speech in the parliament. We went to the emergency room and reported it, of course, to the police. He was attacked about 11 o'clock at night, when he was returning from his girlfriend, and he was attacked and severely beaten. [He got] a concussion and developed some problems with his spinal cord, because he was kicked in the spinal cord. He reported that there was a man in his thirties in a car who was who was calling him names and insulting his mother. The crossing is between the Restaurant Madeira and the Faculty of Law. And he said, 'Well, okay, you have cameras, you can see on cameras, the target, the plates and then you will catch the guy, because I think it was him. I was attacked from behind.' But it happened that the cameras were not working in the centre of town. And then I really started to worry that the political environment is very bad, and my family is not safe."
>
> Sanda Rašković Ivić, former MP, Serbia

Online harassment and hate speech

All the interviewees mentioned experiences with online harassment and hate speech. The abuse often occurred daily, punctuated by periods where the harassment could be overwhelming in its sheer volume in response to the women's political work.

> "I think last time was actually like five minutes ago. So yeah, it is constant, and it has been going on since I got active. I guess I've become a bit numb to how horrible these messages are since, when I see them, I don't even see them as that horrible! Because you see something every single day."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "I think almost on a daily basis, but a lot in different periods. When I was, for example, in the European Parliament, [as] a spokesperson of the progressive groups on migration, that was a very hard time. I was experiencing a lot of threats, death threats and intimidation. Really not nice things, mostly on social media, as a party leader or a female leader."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

> "During hearings in the parliament, I made a speech about a book on the alphabet and the book was very sexist. (...) I was heavily attacked not only by the author of the book but also by this one old guy. And he put my speech into a[n online] group of like 40,000 people, and he asked them to tag me online. There was also a group of men again, who were labelling us as [George] Soros people. It was like a week-long attack."
>
> Sona Ghazaryan, MP, Armenia

Many women noted that the content of the online harassment and hate speech was sexist or sexualized in nature, with messages suggesting that women should not have a role in politics or should be punished for their political participation.

> "I'm divorced. I have no children, and they tried to pick me on this issue. They told me: 'You should stay at home, have children and take care of your husband.' When I was younger, eight years ago, maybe even five years ago, I was worried about it and cared about what people said. It still happens, saying 'You should take care of a man by being in the kitchen. Why did you come into politics? Why do you talk? It's a man's issue. Politics is not for women.'"
>
> Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

> "I have a lot of hate speech on the internet. 'You are ugly. You are unsexy. You need only to go to bed and nothing else.' That's 90 per cent of this hate speech. They say you are only a woman, and they treat me like a sexual object. Not like a woman politician. An object. 'Go back to the kitchen', and lots of comments about my body and face."
>
> Klaudia Jachira, MP, Poland

> When it comes to online harassment, it's hard to count those. I mean, we are talking hundreds of messages, essentially describing what should be done in lesser or greater detail. Although most of the online harassment messages describe in detail [how I should be] sexually punished for my public work."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Intimidation and threats

In addition to hate speech, other forms of harassment — online and offline — involve issuing various kinds of threats to intimidate or create a hostile work environment. A disturbing number of interviewees mentioned death threats that they, or others, had received.

> A group in Serbia started me to call me Jo, referring to Jo Cox, the British woman MP who was killed the year before it started to happen in Serbia with me."[7]
>
> Marinika Tepić, MP, Serbia

> In the last 15 years, there have been more and more women targeted [with] violent verbal attacks on the Internet, letters coming to office emails, coming to Members' offices, threatening them. I have never had anybody accost me on the street yet, but we've had threatening letters. But some of my colleagues have fared even worse. For instance, just two weeks ago, we had emails coming to my office with pictures of a man with a rifle. And then it said, 'and let's get rid of all the MPs that we have to replace with white replacements.'"
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

> My career started in 2000. Then, basically, online hate and online speech didn't exist. My first experience was when I received serious threats to my physical integrity. I was threatened to be killed because of something I said in the plenary session and some proposals I had. The police didn't know how to cope with it."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

Other women had faced rape threats connected to their political work.

> Rape threats. Yes, when I support the pride parade in our country. Nobody threatened me on the street. It's always online."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

7 Joanne Cox was a British politician who served as Member of Parliament from May 2015 until her murder in June 2016. Cox died after being shot and stabbed multiple times in the street in the village of Birstall, where she had been due to hold a constituency surgery.

Others had their addresses or phone numbers publicized, leading to people showing up outside their homes or calling and leaving messages on their phones.

> "It's mainly when we are discussing progressive policies or progressive ideas. Once they invited people to come in front of my apartment. I had to contact the police."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

> "They publicize our phone numbers and get their followers to call us. They would post the phone numbers of MPs, male and female actually, and also (…) ministers. One of my colleagues would get phone calls on WhatsApp or Viber or Telegram cursing and saying, 'Your kids will die in hell' or something."
>
> Sona Ghazaryan, MP, Armenia

Others have received verbal threats 'in real life', including from parliamentary colleagues.

> "Some people verbally attacked me when I was handing [out] leaflets of my party on the street."
>
> Sanda Rašković Ivić, former MP, Serbia

> "There are several instances. The first one involved verbal threats to my child, who was a new-born at the time. A colleague said that they would rape him."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sexual violence and harassment

Respondents shared troubling experiences with sexual violence and harassment, both online and in person. Several described being approached in sexual or sexualized ways online, including through the sharing of sexually explicit content.

> "I have had it on social media. It is always a case of people with fake profiles sending you messages, or asking you to go out with them, or asking you on a date or commenting how pretty you are. These have been a common thing."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "I am familiar with the phenomenon of having quite disturbing content sent to me online. Not too often, I have to say, but it has happened more than once. I've received pictures of penises a couple of times, and then once I received a video call that I accidentally answered, which was a man masturbating on the call."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

Other interviewees alluded to incidents of sexual harassment that took place in person, where they were touched or propositioned in inappropriate ways.

> In 2018, as a Member of Parliament, I was in the elevator with a guy who was from the staff who was bigger than me. I'm kind of tiny, 154 cm tall and only 50 kilos. So, he was bigger than me and came into the lift. He was with two other guys […]. He opened his jacket and grabbed me. I was so shocked because I didn't expect it. And his friends laughed at me. When I came out of the elevator, I was ashamed. I looked at my dress, my jacket, because I'm very conservative. I never, never wear something open. It's good, because I'm an official person. I was looking at myself, saying, 'Okay, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I am wearing something too obvious or something. Maybe it was my fault.' And it took me half an hour to realize, 'Okay, come on, Elvira. It's not your fault.'"
>
> Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

One respondent asked to remain anonymous. She began the story by noting:

> Often in politics your status keeps you kind of safe." But one time, at a political event, she was propositioned by a senior male leader, who suggested she go upstairs and have sex with him. She went home, and the next day she contacted his advisor and demanded that something be done. The senior politician was called to a meeting and sent to behavioural therapy on how to act in professional situations. "But this was only because I demanded that this must happen, and [that] this will never, ever happen again."

Vandalism and property damage

Experiences with vandalism and property damage were quite common among the interviewees. Some mentioned incidents where campaign materials were taken down, defaced or destroyed.

> Oh, yes, it was very common during my campaign that we would put flyers in public areas. And I've had kind of a lot of cases where people would remove these flyers."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> My campaign material has been destroyed. The campaign [team] made one with my face, and many people went and drew on it a swastika."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "Private property, no, but vandalizing my political campaign materials, yes. By tearing, writing on or removing my posters."
>
> Marina Blagojević, head of a party's women's organization, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Others described vandalism of their campaign offices as well as damage inflicted on their personal property, especially their cars.

> "During elections we've had a lot of vandalism where people spray painted things on the windows of your campaign office, calling you things like whore and racist names. I've had people shoot through and break the glass in one of my campaign offices, about ten years ago. They did it at 3 o'clock in the morning, and the police called my campaign manager, and said, 'Oh, by the way, this has happened.' All those kinds of things, we report it to the local police and the local police come, and they sometimes sit outside your campaign office for a few days."
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

> "One time I parked my car, and we have this label, which is a label for being an MP. And we park in designated places for MPs. I parked somewhere else, but I had the card in my window shield. It was really a quick thing, and when I returned, ten or fifteen minutes later, someone had keyed my car. They had scratched it with a key, and it was because of the card which had my name 'Miss Andia Ulliri, Member of Parliament', because none of the other cars were either scratched or keyed."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "During my first campaign, 2015, when I was campaigning in the first months. It was in a rural area. It's not in the capital. My first time. The campaign was from eight in the morning until like eight or nine in the evening. I had the meeting in the evening, and a couple of times I realized that my tire was punctured. And then my car was stopped there. And it happened two or three times, and okay, my reaction was very bad. I was shocked."
>
> Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

Another tool of economic violence involves false allegations of a legal nature, with the intention of creating economic hardship for women politicians. Several interviews touched on these kinds of incidents, noting that women tended to be targeted even when their male colleagues had acted in similar and even more egregious ways.

> "I did this collaboration on social media with an electric bike company. And the media went crazy, and the extreme right went crazy, saying this is corruption. The funniest thing is that that, on the day when this came out, there was an exactly similar corporation-paid cooperation with another member of the Finnish Parliament, but he's a man. Nothing happened to him, but I was in the media for a week. I had to hire a lawyer to prove to the police that this was not corruption, and I end[ed] up paying (…) something like €10,000 to a lawyer to go through the material. [The police determined] I did nothing wrong."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "The statement I made, for which I am being sued by a very controversial tycoon in Sarajevo, is way milder than anything [said] in the same session by male colleagues. The wording that they used is significantly harsher than the wording that I used. However, I was the only one who was sued. The court case for defamation is now in its fourth year. Even if you receive financial support by the party, you don't know how long [the money] will last and how long the court cases will last."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Disinformation campaigns

Most interviewees detailed examples of disinformation campaigns directed against them, often involving the use of stolen or digitally manipulated images.

> "All these kinds of sexual images have been made about me. People take secret pictures of me when I'm out with my friends, and they sell these to the [tabloid] newspapers who then publish them. The public [needs to understand] that everything you see is not true."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "It was [tabloid] television. They were cutting my sentences in half and then gluing them to other sentences. So, my statement looked as if I was completely drugged or drunk or anaesthetized and had just woken up."
>
> Sanda Rašković Ivić, former MP, Serbia

In some instances, these fake images involve impersonation rather than digital editing.

> "Someone on Twitter four years ago, it was not my face, but it was very similar to me. A porno actress similar to me. So, it was not Photoshop exactly. He found an actress very, very similar physically to me. He used [a clip] from a porn film and posted it publicly saying 'This is Jachira. See her having sex."
>
> Klaudia Jachira, MP, Poland

Several respondents offered examples of fake news stories intended to discredit them personally and/or politically.

> "I see this article [about] an MP of the Democratic party who is going into parliament with $800 shoes, and it was an MP from my party [and wondered], 'How haven't I noticed this?' I click and open the article, and the next thing I see is a picture of me in a pair of shoes which I bought for like €45. I bought them in an outlet in Italy. That was one of the cases where the media created disinformation about me as a young person who goes into parliament and sees it as a fashion show. Politicians have created a rhetoric where people are going into parliament with these really fancy clothes and not reflecting the needs of the people."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

Other cases involve using real photos to misrepresent the women or portray them in an unflattering light.

> "They published a series of pictures of some of the MPs, almost all men and just two women. They wrote other names, you know, for us and for me it was 'drolja'. It's something like even worse than 'slut'. There was [also] recently an article about the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, and she's a good friend of mine now. She's not in politics anymore, but they use[d] pictures of the two of us, saying these two are trying to destroy the country and the families, and you know they are part of [the] LGBT[I] community. All these attempts, you know, to give you (…) something that, you know, the public is not accepting positively."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

> "I have a video on Facebook where I have a tie on my suit. I just really love ties, but it's a woman's tie, you know. I also have short hair at the moment. And the trolls started a narrative that I was a male and not a woman. And what kind of women use ties, especially politicians? And they just harassed me on this platform because of my looks, which they don't do for male politicians."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

Others described cases where their private photos were stolen by hackers, and imposters used these images to pose as them online, using fake profiles.

> "I've had these fake accounts that have stolen my pictures and have been pretending to be me. Maybe twice or three times in recent years."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

3.2. THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE

Impact on private life

The interviewees identified various ways in which experiences of violence had affected them at a personal level. For some, the violence made them more self-conscious and led them to start doubting themselves.

> "Sometimes it kind of gets to you in a way that you think that you are really not good enough. You question your abilities, even though you are doing your job every day and trying to inspire people. But then, you see all this negative feedback, and you think, 'Is it really worth it? Am I really doing my job right?' So that kind of accumulation; it kind of gets to you, even though I've tried my best not to take it to heart."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "I'm like 25 years in all of this. Now I'm much calmer. It happens. I report. I block. I do whatever I think is needed to be done, and then I can sleep at the end of the day. Before, it was not like that, because it bothered me much, much more. And I took it much more personally. But I still need to explain it to myself that it's not personal. It's because of my job."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

Others described how the violence had disturbed their peace of mind.

> "I'm a psychiatrist myself. And I spoke with my friend, who is a psychiatrist as well. I confided my fears that something might happen. I lost my peace of mind as I had it."
>
> Sanda Rašković Ivić, former MP, Serbia

> "I have some fear inside myself as a politician and as a public person, that maybe, when I am having fun with my friends and family members in public space, in the cafes, in restaurants, or outside, [that] someone is recording me or taking photos or videos that they will use against me. Because of this, I don't act freely in every situation."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

> "You go down, and you go up. When a big campaign towards you starts, you go inside yourself. I'm normally there for like a week, and then I fight myself away from there. But you know, when it happens, it feels like everyone's talking about you, although they're not. No, that's not really happening. Most people are talking at home to their cats.

They're not talking about you. But it's hard to understand that when you are down, and you feel like everyone is speaking about you, and you become a bit paranoid."

Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

Some respondents explained how these effects led them to change their personal routines and behaviours in sometimes dramatic ways.

"You become very fearful about talking on the phone. You become very careful when talking with people, because everybody can tape you, and you become very fearful that anything on social media can be manipulated. And you can look in a certain way."

Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

"I do not like to be by myself in many places. I don't want to be the first one who comes to a restaurant. I want someone to be there at the table, waiting for me. I do not want to wait for people on the street. I avoid being alone in a public place, especially at night-time. I don't want to spend holidays in Finland."

Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

"The first time [my tires were slashed], I was scared to be honest. I got a bodyguard later. Well, not really a bodyguard. I asked someone who knows me to stay with me all the time, because after that I had feeling that I could be attacked, or something."

Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

Others found a solution in leaving, or limiting their time on social media, even though they had previously enjoyed being part of the online space.

"It has affected my mental well-being. [Online harassment], of course, makes you feel more negative about what you're doing. There's so much negativity and so little positivity and good comments from people. It has made me doubt whether I should post something or not, just because I know some things are going to come after I post it. Maybe it's just easier not to post something and not communicate through social media that much."

Leila Rasima, MP, Latvia

"I'm more careful these days, especially with social media. I mean, I share a lot of my life on social media. But I don't share much about my family, or where we are, or especially about my children, or actually not my husband either. I'm more aware of the possibilities of people wanting to harm me."

Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

> "Social media is only for my work. I don't use Instagram, Facebook and Twitter for my private life. It's a very important part of my work, social media. I hate Twitter, but now I am a politician, I must have Twitter."
>
> Klaudia Jachira, MP, Poland

> "I'm not active on X anymore. I don't have the energy. I don't want to put myself out there anymore. I am not active on X because of all the hate messages I get. But it's still sad, because it was good."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

Concerns about loved ones

Some women reported that the violence not only affected them personally but also led them to worry about the safety of their loved ones.

> "I was worried sometimes, but not so much for myself as for the safety of my children, who were still small at the time. We tried not to let them feel it. You often wonder how much they know and understand about everything happening around me, and how much it affects them. I think I did my best at that time to ensure my family was not disturbed."
>
> Lolita Čigāne, former MP, Latvia

> "They make me angry, because this is not right. Personally, I don't have a problem to fight with them. But the consequences that my Mum or my husband feel, of course, and my children... If they deserve this kind of life, that is my responsibility. I involved them. And this is the key question for me as a mother, as a wife, as a daughter."
>
> Marinika Tepić, MP, Serbia

Some offered examples of family members being harassed.

> "They were calling my grandmother who is 70 years old. I recognized that the number on her phone was not calling from Georgia, but from outside. I told her not to answer, because they will insult and threaten her, saying 'We know that your grandchild is a politician. If you do not limit her activity, we will kill her.' I warned my family members, and for the first time in my life, I bought pepper spray. Because we had the experience in front of the house."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

> "I was in the train with my mother. It was the first weeks after my first election. I [had been] a Member of Parliament for about four weeks, and some man came over to us in the restaurant car. He started yelling that he hates me, but he was also screaming ugly things at my mother, because I think he knew she was my mother… It was maybe the first time when I thought, 'Oh, it's not only about me. Sometimes it can be about my mother.' [But] I think I'm [in] a good situation... I'm independent. I don't have children. I don't have a husband, so the hate cannot be connected further to my family."
>
> Klaudia Jachira, MP, Poland

Change in approach to political work

Experiences with violence, in some cases, led women to rethink or modify their approach to their political work, even as they remained committed to issues that mattered to them.

> "I think the intention behind all of those attacks is to silence women, to make them stop engaging in politics, to discourage them and to make them give up. That experience has had an effect on my political work."
>
> Lolita Čigāne, former MP, Latvia

> "I became more careful with the words I chose. I'm trying to be less emotional. I don't want my message to be heard the wrong way. I don't want to spoil the message, but I still speak about gender equality quite often. It didn't stop me."
>
> Sona Ghazaryan, MP, Armenia

> "Sometimes I think twice before posting something if it's something controversial. I need to see if I have the time and energy to cope with what will follow. I know if I post this, I will then have like two days coping with threats or insults or stupid comments. I should be able to feel free to post my opinions and what I stand for. If I don't have time to cope with it for the next few days, I don't publish it."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

Other women were adamant that they would not let the violence influence their work.

> "When that threat appeared, the person who was chosen to send me the news was a friend of mine for many years. They came to tell me that, if I don't keep quiet, they're going to try to ruin my family. So, I encouraged them to do it. I said I will show the photos to the media myself, and my votes will be according to my belief."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

> "When I have these kinds of experiences, I raise my voice in the media and on social media. They can't threaten me."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

Thoughts about leaving politics

The aim of violence against women in politics is to get women to leave their political roles. Some women admitted that these incidents did, in fact, make them consider whether staying in political life was really worth the sacrifice.

> "I'm quite often questioning myself if it's worth it. I don't know. My life is passing by, and [I wonder] if the things I can accomplish are worth it. From time to time, I have these thoughts that, maybe, I'll finish these two years; two more years. And then maybe I don't go for the next election."
>
> Leila Rasima, MP, Latvia

> "You are just thinking in your head like, 'What am I even doing here?' But I wouldn't say that that would be a reason for me to quit, because I still think that, in those kinds of moments, you actually get another message to your head: 'that… [we need] to keep going, because [otherwise] you just leave it to another person who acts in a violent way.' So, I think that there's always a moment when you have an answer to the question, What am I doing here?' You think, actually, I am here to show that there's also another way of doing things."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "I've considered leaving politics occasionally. If I really felt that this would be harmful for my children, I would immediately quit. But I won't."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

At least one woman who was interviewed did leave politics, at least in part due to the violence and resistance she faced.

> "They are just blocking you; decreasing you; your credibility. You're no longer in a position to push. We were pushing so hard. At the end, you decide just to leave. If there is no support, why am I spending my time [on this]? I decided to leave politics as a playground. But I'm still close to the development of policies and influencing policies in the country. I've just changed the method. Inside the institution, but from outside."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

Other respondents, in contrast, were adamant that the violence would not pressure them to leave politics, but instead inspired them to remain.

> "No! Isn't that what the people who threaten me want me to do? Why would I be blackmailed and allow myself to be afraid?"
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

> "I thought that it would be the best thing to leave politics. And then, well, okay. I said, 'Well, okay, I will not do that. I will not. I will not let bad people intimidate me that much.'"
>
> Sanda Rašković Ivić, former MP, Serbia

> "No, no! They cannot shut me down. I'm here in politics because I want to make changes. And if I strongly do believe in something, I will fight for it. And if you try to stop me, I will fight even more."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

> "I am totally committed personally. But on some occasions, it's like, you know, why should I stay? Why shouldn't I go back to civil society? But activists are also being attacked."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, former MP, North Macedonia

> "Women politicians in Georgia are under threat. And because of this I want to be strong, to be an example to other women, who are still trying to decide to enter or not into politics."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

Impact on personal life and relationships

Interviewees pointed to ways in which the violence had negatively affected their personal lives and relationships.

Several noted how these experiences had changed their relationships with their children, as they took steps to keep them safe and sheltered from the violence.

> "In 2020, [due to serious physical and sexual threats against my child], I made the terrible decision that didn't feel terrible at the time, but now it does, to give my child to my parents. And she stayed with them outside the capital city for years. So, I have seen my child only a few times. It feels more difficult now than then. You feel you're just pushing forward, and there is no way back, and you have to go forward."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

> "I get a lot of support. And I know that I would get a lot of support if I would, you know, go public with all the [stuff] that I received. But I don't want to do that, and I realize, now that I'm talking to you, that it's because of my children, because I don't want them to be worried. Yeah, I mean, I would hate for my kid to read from a tabloid that her Mum is under a threat, or something like that."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

Others observed that the violence had taken a toll on their parents and siblings.

> "My siblings or my parents. They can read. I notice that they are hurt, you know, because, you know, people send them links. That's when I said that, you know, I'm not going to allow it anymore. When I noticed that my family members were hurt was when they said that I shouldn't take it so easily, [which seemed to imply that] that I didn't care for them."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

> "It was more difficult for my family than for me. I got used to it and got a thick skin. It didn't touch me the way it would probably touch normal people (…) But for my mother, I know [it] was the hardest, because she didn't accept that they were writing bad things about me. She wanted to fight back through social media, and I really had to stop her quite often. 'Please don't write.' My family was more affected because they didn't understand, and it hurt them."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

Some also reflected on how the violence had impacted their romantic partnerships. One interviewee, who wished to stay anonymous, shared:

> "When I'm in the midst of an incident, I'm more shut down, so to say, from being present in my everyday private life. I'm less present. I'm there, but I'm not there. I don't know how to explain it. And sometimes it's really too much. I take some anxiety pills and go to sleep very early in the evening. As we have long working hours, this evening time should be for my family and for my partner. If I take my anxiety pills and go to sleep at 10 pm, I don't have time for my partner and my family. The worst thing is that I'm there. I'm cooking the lunch, for example, on the weekend or something, but I'm not there. I'm physically there, but mentally I'm not there, and that's not fair to my family member."

3.3. COPING STRATEGIES

Telling others

Many of the women coped with their experiences by telling others about the violence. Several shared that they relied on friends and family members for moral support.

> "Family for me is really important, so I always rely on my family, and I do have really good friends, but also people that I met through my work, who are people related to my party. Anytime something happens, they text me or ask me about my well-being, so I would say that I have a support group. You have to have a group of people who are always there for you in the moments that you are questioning yourself."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "I talked to my partner about it. I talk to my colleagues. We discuss it. Sometimes we rant about it. Sometimes I ask for advice from our communication team."
>
> Leila Rasima, MP, Latvia

> "I was very blessed… There is a team of seven people [who] became my family. Not my friend, not party workers. They are my family, and they always will be my family. I keep these situations only in the group of seven. [A] small group, people of trust, and moving forward."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

However, others noted that they sometimes hid these incidents from family members.

> "I do share it with my colleagues; less with family members, because they're not the biggest fans of me being in politics. Why give them additional ammunition? I do share it sometimes with my colleagues as a way of also sharing with other women, not accepting [the violence] but acknowledging it as a part of political life."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

> "I never tell my parents. I will never tell them, because my parents are still alive, and I don't want to expose them. I tell my partner. He doesn't need to know, but I want him to know, and we share our life. So, I tell him some of it, not everything. Maybe because I want to protect him, or I want to save him from it, because he cannot help me."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

Some respondents opted to speak out about the violence, posting publicly on social media channels, for example, to raise awareness about this problem.

> "Sometimes I share the messages on my social media pages, because I want people to see what kind of idiocy exists in the world. I don't even think that these messages are really about me. People are just expressing their own sadness and hate, and [are] feeling left out of society. I normally post it with something like, 'I know that this person feels bad, but I hope he feels better soon.' Do not fight hate with hate. For me there is no shame, because I am not the problem."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "I did it for the first time two months ago. I screenshot everything and posted, 'Okay, my dear friends. This is what I have in my inbox every Saturday. These are the people who are sharing the air and the earth with us.' I didn't blur their names or screen names. The reaction of the people was interesting. One side was shocked, because they didn't believe that something like this existed. I was proud of doing this, because the strategy that worked was to put it out in public. The public is my safeguard."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

A number of women decided to report the incidents to the police.

> "I call the police. The Vancouver police is on our speed dial. They know to keep an eye on me. In fact, many years ago, when I was a minister, I had a man threaten to kill me. We reported it. I let the police know, and they were in my constituency office when he came in and tried to threaten me again. They grabbed him, and they put a [restraining] order on him that he shouldn't be anywhere within so many blocks or so many miles from where I am."
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

> "On one occasion there were several messages and images of a brutal rape that were sent to me. I reported it to the police immediately. I know that they will probably not react or not find the sender, but I still think it's very important that they keep track of what is going on. I think that everything that triggers fear or an emotional response with me should be reported. The institutions can then decide if it is, or is not, harassment. That's their job. My job is to report it if I feel endangered in any way."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

> The times that I have informed the police (…) I'd say we have three cases of this kind, me or my family. The latest case was a Facebook post, so I could have easily ignored it. The police called me to thank me for making the effort. I really felt that they took me seriously. They understood why I was worried, and they made the effort to let me know that I don't have to be worried."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

However, others felt that there was little use in reporting to the police, as they were rarely able to do anything to hold the perpetrators to account.

> I used to do police reports on everything, and I've been really encouraging everyone else to also do that. I don't do it as often anymore, because nothing ever happens. I have better things to do."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> Reporting to the police has not proven efficient in terms of protection. There are breaks are in the system. They slow you down. They tell you that it was not that bad."
>
> Marina Blagojević, head of a party's women's organization, Bosnia and Herzegovina

> I don't have a positive experience, neither from my personal experiences nor from the experiences of my women colleagues. I always compare it to cases where a mayor or the Prime Minister were treated [badly] online, and the police immediately reacted. When you talk to the police, they say, 'Somebody wrote that they are going to kill them and their children.' Yes, and somebody wrote to me that they are going to rape me, you know."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

Taking action

Respondents also took action in other ways to increase their security and peace of mind.

> After that incident happened, my parents were really worried about my well-being, so they hired a private chauffeur for me. They thought that I was going to need someone to be by my side at all times. They were like, 'You should have somebody accompany you.' Some MPs do have a private chauffeur. But for me, it was a way for my family to not feel that they should be worried."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "I know what I will do for the next four days. Report, block, report, block, report, block. It's every nasty thing you can imagine that a human being can say to another human being. I think I've reported a few hundred. I don't know how many. I think my report succeeded once or twice. Usually, they say it's not against our rules. So, I block."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

Some women also described not doing anything as a deliberate action.

> "In that case, where that politician posted my photo and all the comments were rolling, I actually did nothing. Just let it, like, kind of calm down, because [if] I do something, [they're going] to do even more. In some cases, it has been the communications team which has said, like, let's check if it goes more viral, and then we'll address it. If not, we won't give more flame to that attack."
>
> Leila Rasima, MP, Latvia

Physical strategies

The women adopted a number of physical strategies to cope with the violence. A number described how they used physical activity as a way to deal with stress.

> "I started doing yoga. I always said, 'Yoga is not for me.' But I need it to reduce the level of stress."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

> "I always make a joke that I'm doing Pilates to be able to protect myself. But I'm doing Pilates not to physically protect myself, but for my inner peace."
>
> Sona Ghazaryan, MP, Armenia

> "I had this back pain, and some of my colleagues are doctors. So, they said, 'Why don't you start to go swimming? You're going to have such relief.' And then I found out that when I was going there to swim, I was not only relieving the back pain but also all that negativity was kind of flushing away."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

> "I have training with my dog with other people in the Dog Club. You have physical activity and the dogs. It's only two hours a week. But this is the only time in my life that I don't have a microphone next to me. I even have it on my nightstand when I sleep. I need to be focused on my dog and the other dogs."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

Many interviewees also took steps to increase their physical security. One set of strategies focused on using safer forms of transport.

> "I don't use public transport alone at night. Or even in the evening. I use public transport in the mornings when I'm going to work. At night I use a taxi."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "When I go to my office, I usually take a cab, so people don't know when I'm coming or when I'm going. We do not post what I'm going to be doing in advance. We talk about it after I've done it, as we don't want people to know where I'm going to be at any given point in time."
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

> "I would not really park my car on the road. I would always park in private parking places. Sometimes I pay way too much money for that. But it's just the idea that my car is safe, and if I go there, even if it's night-time, then I'm also safe."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

Another set of strategies entailed adopting new routines to increase their security.

> "I just started taking pepper spray with me. I also have it in my car."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

> "When campaigning, we usually tried to work in teams, preferably a female and a male colleague in one team. I believe that reduced some risks."
>
> Lolita Čigāne, former MP, Latvia

> "For a couple of months, I stopped using the elevator. When I got into an elevator, if I saw someone I rushed out. Now when an elevator opens and there are men inside, for a couple of seconds I stand there, and then I say, 'I'll take the stairs."
>
> Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

> "I am more cautious. I've been a very careless person before, in the sense that I trust in people, and I trust in life, and I haven't been so worried about, you know, being super certain that the doors are locked and my cell phone is charged, and my kids are like they have everything. Know where they are. So that sort of thing. [When posting on social media] about being in the park, I was just very cautious that I would never show [my kids'] faces."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

> "For a year and a half, I noticed a car parked in front of my parents' house with a person sitting inside. I did two things. A couple of times I changed my routine [in terms of] when I'm going out and coming home. Finally, I decided to deal with it in a different way. In the middle of winter, a cold December day, I decided to go downstairs and bring them tea. So, they know that I know, and we are done with that."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

Other women declined extra security measures.

> "I hated [security] as vice Prime Minister. I was obliged by the law. Sometimes they block you from communicating with people. And that's why I never ask for security."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

Mental and emotional strategies

The interviewees also employed a range of mental and emotional strategies in response to the violence they experienced.

> "I did find that probably the most difficult part of my career. And I did seek psychological help, because I simply felt overwhelmed. I found it helpful to seek assistance; a therapist to talk to for about five to six months and kind of analysing various coping mechanisms. Great advice I got, as stereotypical as it sounds, was to seek a greater balance — work-life balance — as a grounding force."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

> "I was bullied on social media. It was not hundreds, but thousands of comments. I was broken. I stopped giving interviews, and I stopped writing. [I] stopped reading comments because of my mental health. I didn't want to talk to anyone emotionally. I was poisoned. I felt like I was poisoned. But I couldn't go to a psychologist, because it's not safe, because I'm famous, and I'm a Member of Parliament. It's another tragedy.
>
> Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

Others pointed to other ways they had tried to improve their mental health.

> "Maybe not full meditation, but concentration using cosmic energy. It's something that you're connecting with your body."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

> I have a great dog and he is a very important therapy. I love contact with people, with animals, with nature."
>
> Marinika Tepić, MP, Serbia

> Tomorrow we are going, three girls for four days, just on a girls' trip, which we do twice a year. My friends don't know much about my time in between. This is quite important."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

Many women described steps they had taken to reduce their exposure to digital violence.

> I give my phone to someone else, and then they control everything so that I don't have to even see anything. If a [harassment] campaign starts, I take a step back, and I let other people just manage it. Some people have this horrible need to torture themselves by reading [stuff] that is written about them. I don't need that."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> I never read it. I never open social media or read the comments. I asked my communication department. I said, 'Only if something is important for our work then share it with [me]. [Otherwise] just block, hide or do the things that need to be done to stop the spread. But that's all.' And that's how I survived."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

> Most of the time I don't read [social media] anymore. I stopped reading. And I've got this advice. I think everyone in our lives goes through that. At some point you realize that it's just healthier for you not to look."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

Others shared how they reasoned with themselves to reduce the impact of online hate.

> I never recognized those as real threats. Most of them are machines. They're not real."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

> I protected myself by explaining to myself that these are people that don't know me. They are most probably unsatisfied with themselves, with life. That how I try to convince myself it's not really personal."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

3.4. SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

Political parties

> "Interviewees offered mixed opinions about the support they received from their political parties in response to violent incidents. Some felt that parties did not do enough."I was hurt by the absence of reaction from my political group, because you expect, you know, to be supported."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

For some, individual party leaders made a difference.

> "We have a really good party secretary now. She's a smart person, and I know that she's really supportive of everyone. Even before something happens, she makes sure that you know who is there to help you."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

Other women identified ways that parties helped them, both formally and informally.

> "From my political party, 100%. My party chairwoman and leader and party members were all with me together. They knew about everything."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

> "It's more informal. You speak to some people responsible for media content, and they give you a list of options of what to do."
>
> Sona Ghazaryan, MP, Armenia

> "What we offer is free legal advice and free legal representation. I insisted to the party [about this, to support] women who are targeted if they want to pursue it. There were two court cases against me. I won both of them, but one refused to cover the court expenses. These were in the end covered by the party, because they threatened to continue with the lawsuits as a way of prolonging payments (…) As a member of the party leadership, I absolutely insist that we cover that."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Civil society

A number of respondents appreciated the support they received from civil society, especially from women's organizations.

> "They do understand about harassment and bullying issues. They sometimes call us to say, 'Are you okay? If you need something, please let us know.' I know if I need it, I can call them, and they will support me. But I should give them a sign to say, 'I need you.'"
>
> Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

> "Oh, so much support. All these feminists and women all around me are supporting me. I feel extremely supported. I always say I never feel alone. Instagram is filled with people who are supporting me, who are lifting me up."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "Some of them. Organizations that defend women's rights. They reacted. I'm very appreciative of that. It creates this sense that somebody is on your side."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

> "Women's organizations were supportive. They even have done some analysis when they tracked hate speech. [But there is] still sometimes a gap between civil society and women in politics, because women in politics are a privileged group. So, it's normal to have the reaction sometimes from civil society, 'Why should we defend these women that are already privileged?' But we need each other. It's so important when you see that you are supported, not just within your own circle, you know, but by other groups of women."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

Women politicians

The interviewees also had mixed opinions about the support they received from other female politicians. Some reported that women did come together across party lines to support other women who were being attacked.

> "Five or six months ago, we formed a cross-party group of women MPs. A colleague in another party was verbally attacked by another MP in a really sexist manner. And we joined all together as women MPs and put out a joint press release and actions to stand behind our colleagues."
>
> Marija Lugarić, MP, Croatia

> "When something horrible happens, I get support from women politicians from different parties and also from some male politicians. People who are your friends in different political parties, they will support you, no matter what. And that is something that has been fantastic. I've been really, really supported by women from different political parties. This has taught me that, when someone is in a crisis, I [should] immediately contact them."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "There were a few initiatives in the parliament. A few years ago, in 2016 I think, [we tried] to make this this network with all the women parliament. From the ruling party to the opposition, with common conclusions on some issues. So, we can react together if some woman is attacked. We can't have a political side. We must act together."
>
> Marinika Tepić, MP, Serbia

However, some respondents noted that cross-party support was limited and help came only from women inside their own parties.

> "In 2013, the women's parliamentary network was established. And it kind of worked. [In] 2013 and 2014 it worked, but after that the situation changed. Loyalty to the party exceeded the loyalty to gender and even to humanity. I dare to say so. There was a lack of empathy towards the 'other', if that 'other' was from another party."
>
> Sanda Rašković Ivić, former MP, Serbia

Some women highlighted the role of individual women who provided support.

> "In my political party, the vice president of the party and Minister of Defence. She will call you and give you advice on how to survive in a political party that is pretty chauvinist."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

> "After one of the attacks, the speaker of the parliament, a woman colleague, sent me a message telling me that I was a strong woman and that I should not pay attention to the attacks or let them affect me. In another case, a woman colleague, an MP, invited me to her home for dinner to talk about what was happening and to offer support."
>
> Lolita Čigāne, former MP, Latvia

Parliament

Interviewees identified several parliamentary mechanisms for dealing with violence or threats of violence, including when perpetrated by fellow MPs or parliamentary staff. Some found them to be helpful, but others were more sceptical about their effectiveness.

> "After one of the attacks, I reported it to the parliamentary commission in charge of ethics violations. They started a procedure, and the perpetrator received a reprimand and discontinued his attacks."
>
> Lolita Čigāne, former MP, Latvia

> "The parliament has now put extremely complex systems in every parliamentarian's house. I have cameras in my house. I have complex alarm systems. And in our constituency offices, we have the same thing — cameras, alarm systems and stuff. We have all sorts of insurance. We have counselling. We have protective services. If I get anything that's threatening in the slightest bit, immediately my staff will report the threat to the head of protective services, and they immediately take it, and they start to investigate and see if they can find out who the person is. That's the most anybody can do."
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

> "With that case [of harassment] in the elevator, I still react. I complained to the Speaker, and I was arguing with him, 'Why didn't you call me and ask me [how I was]?' I was absent for two weeks. 'Why didn't you ask me, as a young MP: How are you? Can I help you? Can I punish this guy?' Only when I asked these questions did he start to investigate."
>
> Elvira Surabaldieva, MP, Kyrgyzstan

Several women mentioned initiatives for countering violence within legislative bodies that had been proposed but not passed.

> "My party initiated several sexual harassment changes to the statutes of various legislative bodies. It wasn't adopted. Sexual harassment or gender-based harassment is not recognized in most of the statutes of the legislative bodies that I was in."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

> "There's such a strong solidarity among men in politics, regardless of political ideology. I think that is the reason we didn't manage to get a special outside person. Something like, you know, an ombudsman, to have a place where you as a woman MP can go and submit a complaint. Never once was a case of sexual harassment dealt with in the parliament."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

Lawyers

Numerous women spoke with a lawyer about incidents they faced, but, in most instances, these consultations were informal. Some reported being advised to pursue charges.

> "I talked with a friend of mine who is familiar with these kind of cases as a lawyer. I talked with her, and she supported me, and she clarified to me that, clearly, this is a crime. 'This is not okay. Go forward with it.'"
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

> "I consulted a lawyer, asking 'What shall I do?' And I got the advice to do it. Not be quiet. So, yes, on that I got a push."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

In general, however, the lawyers advised against pursuing charges. This was not for legal reasons, but, rather, due to the immense amount of time and resources required to pursue these cases with few anticipated benefits.

> "Fortunately, 90 per cent of my family members are lawyers. And they have all advised me not to go forward with the lawsuit. You're just going to be stuck in a situation of a never-ending story that will not help you. You will lose time [and be seen as] a victim for the rest of your life."
>
> Rashela Mizrahi, MP, North Macedonia

> "You can go to private courts where you spend a lot of money, and the result takes maybe two or three years, but it doesn't really satisfy you. So, the damage is there. The end result is not worth the fight."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

> "I called a lawyer to say, 'What is my position? What are my options?' And he said there is a possibility for a civil procedure against them for misinformation or something. And what? I will get €1000 from the person. That's too much procedure, too much energy for nothing."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

Several women expressed their frustration about the capacity of the judicial system to tackle this problem.

> "I do not feel that the justice system is there for me. Even as an MP, I do not feel that the justice system is there for me. I do not trust it."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "Returning to the beating of my son, I think that the judiciary failed there. This story about cameras that are not working (...) I think that the judiciary system is under the control of the regime. And that's a shame."
>
> Sanda Rašković Ivić, former MP, Serbia

Legislative bodies

The interviews also revealed mixed views on laws and other legal reforms as a strategy to combat violence against women in politics. At least one woman felt that the laws did work.

> "[In a case affecting me] they took it seriously, and they even found the guy. There were two women journalists in Slovenia who were intimidated and faced a gender-based attack by the Prime Minister at that time. They won all the court decisions, and he had to pay."
>
> Tanja Fajon, Minister, Slovenia

Others noted that existing laws were not strong enough to hold perpetrators accountable.

> "During the 2020 and 2021 election campaigns, people who were allegedly sent in advance attacked Anna Dolidze and our team. We wrote two or three complaints to the prosecutor's office, but they did not answer, and they are not investigating. We have very good laws on gender equality and family violence, but we have a problem in the enforcement of this law."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

> "Of course, you know, the trolls and the nasty people online. They know what kind of hate speech to post without it being a crime, right? They know very clearly which limits they cannot cross."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

> "We voted for amendments in the penal law to make online harassment a criminal act. [But] when you talk to the police, the reaction is, 'This is online. It's not regulated.' There's nothing we can do, because Facebook and other social media are not regulated."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

Several highlighted further legal reforms that were needed to deal with this issue, especially in online spaces.

> "There are hate laws in Canada that hold people to account. But, online harms, we're just putting forward a new bill that's going to be stronger to deal with that, and it's not finished being debated in parliament."
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

> "We need criminalization of racist hate speech. Finland doesn't have that. That's something that we have been recommended as a country to do, so that should be done. We also need a European answer to how to better control Meta and other platforms."
>
> Fatim Diarra, MP, Finland

> "I know [hate on the Internet] is a global problem. It's not only a problem for Polish law. I think there must be some resolution in the European Union, because I know so well the process. To find this person the prosecutor must ask Facebook or Twitter, 'Who is this?' And it's the end. They don't have to tell them."
>
> Klaudia Jachira, MP, Poland

3.5. ADVICE TO OTHER WOMEN

The last part of the interviews asked for advice that other women could use to deal with violence and intimidation. Various respondents stressed that it was important not to accept these incidents as a 'normal' part of doing politics.

> "I don't want to say to grow thicker skin. No, I think we shouldn't normalize it. It shouldn't be normal. We need to support each other more, to talk about these issues not just with female colleagues, also with male colleagues."
>
> Leila Rasima, MP, Latvia

> "It is always frustrating for me when I hear, 'But you signed up for this when you applied for this job.' No, it's not [what I signed up for]. Being in politics should not be about tolerating violence and threats."
>
> Sanela Shkrijelj, MP, North Macedonia

> "To talk loudly about their experiences. There is no reason to be ashamed. We should talk about our experiences on every platform to share [our] experiences with other politicians."
>
> Nini Tsuladze, local councillor, Georgia

Several highlighted the need for women to show solidarity with other women under attack, even when those women are members of other political parties.

> "You have to have one voice. In the parliament there are a lot of cases where, let's say, a colleague is being targeted because she's a woman. Colleagues from the majority only react when it is one of theirs. Those from the opposition react only when it is one of theirs. We need to bring people together to say that harassment of any kind is inappropriate. It should not be happening at all."
>
> Andia Ulliri, MP, Albania

They also emphasized the importance of staying true to oneself in the face of violence.

> "To keep people that were close to [you] before [you] became a politician. Never forget why you became a politician."
>
> A former minister from South-East Europe

> "If you are scared, if your family and you have been threatened constantly, you're the only person who can make that decision as to whether you want to stay or you want to go. It all depends. People will react differently, based on their own particular personality, their situation. What we need are tools, legislation, all kinds of tools and stuff, and Parliament should provide that to help to make sure that people are protected and safe."
>
> Hedy Fry, MP, Canada

Above all, they encouraged women to stay in politics because their voices are needed.

> "My message is that you are not alone in this. I mean, I understand that people are worried. [Violence] is something that we should not have in life. It is there, and it just underlines how important it is that we have people with different backgrounds; we really need people to participate. And we need to work hard on making politics safe."
>
> Saara-Sofia Sirén, MP, Finland

> "I would say that we are all scared. But this is not why you should stop. This is why you should not stop yourself."
>
> Sona Ghazaryan, MP, Armenia

> "It's so tempting to give up in the first couple of steps. But I do think it's rewarding to stay. Marching on the issues that got you into politics in the first place."
>
> Sabina Ćudić, MP, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Recommendations[8]

The interviews point to several clear recommendations for future action to prevent and hold perpetrators accountable for acts of violence against women in politics. Notably, most of the women interviewed for this tool relied primarily (and often exclusively) on **individual-level coping strategies** to deal with the violence they faced. These strategies give women an immediate way to respond to incidents, for example, by prioritizing their physical safety or protecting their mental health in the short term.

However, these strategies are also necessary when institutional mechanisms are absent or ineffective. Without other protections, women must rely on themselves to deal with violence, and the interviewees made some helpful suggestions. At the same time, other actors, such as political parties, parliaments and legal professionals, have a duty to introduce and strengthen the support structures in place, to ensure that women can participate in politics fully, freely and safely, and on the same terms as men.

INDIVIDUAL COPING STRATEGIES

- **Tell others.** Rather than suffering alone, sharing the incidents can help you receive much-needed moral support from friends and family members. Using your social media platform to expose acts of violence against you can be a vital way to raise public awareness. Reporting incidents through official channels can also be important to ensure a trail of evidence in case of potential legal action in the future.

- **Make a safety plan.** Assess the possible vulnerabilities to your personal security — both physical and online — and take steps to increase your safety and peace of mind. Physical strategies might include hiring security personnel, changing your daily routine, using safer forms of transport and being more aware of potential dangers in your surroundings. Online strategies might include blocking and reporting harmful posts and increasing digital security to avoid hacking and account impersonation.

- **Prioritize your mental health.** Seek support if you feel overwhelmed, for example, by seeing a professional therapist who can help with processing your emotions and figuring out coping mechanisms that work for you. Use meditation or physical exercise for stress relief. Spend time with friends and family to take a break from politics, however brief.

8 Please consult also Tool 5 of ODIHR's Violence against Women in Politics Toolkit: Support and Encouragement for Women in Politics, which gives guidance for women affected directly or indirectly by such violence on how to seek protection, remedy and support.

- **Take breaks from social media**. You do not need to delete your accounts, but you might ask your staff or others to take care of your accounts for a while, until you are ready to return. You might consider making your personal accounts private, accessible only to a close circle of people, and giving control of your professional account to staff members who can post and report back to you.

- **Connect with other women politicians.** Getting support from other women in parliament can be very helpful for coping with violent incidents — as well as for mobilizing to fight for measures to address them. This support might be very informal, such as inviting someone to dinner to discuss their experiences, or more formal, such as bringing women together to press for legislative and policy reforms.

- **Reach out to women's groups in civil society.** These groups are likely already to have a strong understanding of gender-based violence, making them a sympathetic support base. They may also be crucial allies in pursuing legislation and other measures to combat violence against women in politics. In some cases, they may also be willing to collect and publish data on this phenomenon, raising broader public awareness and increasing the pressure on institutions to respond.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT MECHANISMS

For political parties:

- **Take violent incidents seriously.** Do not minimize or dismiss women's experiences. Provide moral and practical support to women targeted by violence. Adopt procedures for dealing with violence when it is committed by one party member against another, to ensure that party spaces are safe for women.

- **Raise awareness among party members.** Speak out against violence against women in politics. Establish codes of conduct to educate members on acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in party meetings, on the campaign trail and after elections, highlighting that there is no place in the party for violence, threats, harassment or intimidation.

- **Provide tangible forms of support to women targeted by violence.** Allocate funds to pay for free legal advice and representation for women party members to hold perpetrators accountable through the judicial system.

For parliaments:

- **Propose and pass legislation**. Prohibit acts of violence against women in politics and add this violence to the list of ethical violations handled by parliamentary ethics committees. These laws and regulations should not only be limited to cases of in-person violence, threats of violence, harassment or intimidation, but should also address cases of online violence and harassment, treating online behaviours as seriously as offline behaviours.

- **Introduce codes of conduct**. These codes should outline broad standards for the behaviour of MPs. A specific code should also be adopted to prohibit violence, threats, harassment and intimidation, including of a sexual nature in parliament. This policy should be accompanied by training for MPs and staff, and the creation of an independent office in parliament to deal with complaints.

- **Provide funds and other types of support to increase the security of women politicians in their offices and at their homes**. Offer training to women politicians on how they can take steps to increase their own security, for example, on safety precautions to take while travelling and while engaging with the public online.

- **Work with social media companies**. Set standards for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour online. Press for social media companies to cooperate with the country's legal authorities, in order to hold perpetrators of violence against women in politics accountable for incidents of online harassment and hate speech.

In the police force and the judiciary:

- **Offer training to police officers**. Because violence against women in politics has only been recognized more recently, law enforcement personnel may not be equipped to deal effectively with such incidents. The training should focus on raising awareness of the legal tools available and sharing best practices on how to handle these cases with greater sensitivity.

- **Raise awareness among judges and lawyers**. Legal professionals should be educated on the issue of violence against women in politics. They should be instructed on aspects of existing and planned legislation, how to recognize these crimes and how to hold perpetrators to account.

ADVICE TO WOMEN IN POLITICS

- **Refrain from normalizing violence as the cost of doing politics**. It is not acceptable and threatens democracy, human rights and gender equality.

- **Show solidarity with other women in politics**. Speak out against gender-based attacks against other women politicians. Express support for women's right to participate in politics, regardless of their political party.

- **Remember why you entered politics in the first place**. Stay true to yourself, and do not let violence change your priorities or affect your political work, if at all possible. Do not leave politics if you are able to continue, because your voice is important and needed for democracy.

Annexe: Interview template and research ethics

INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

Background

Could you tell me in a few sentences about your political career, in terms of the offices you have held and for how long?

Experiences of violence

- Have you personally experienced any physical attacks connected to your work as a politician?
- Have you ever faced any online harassment, hate speech, intimidation or threats as a politician?
- Have you faced any sort of sexual violence, coercion or harassment connected to your work in politics?
- Has anyone ever damaged or vandalized your property, e.g., your home or office, or your campaign materials?
- Have you ever been the subject of disinformation campaigns. E.g., has anyone ever photoshopped your image in negative ways or created fake news stories that attack you personally?
- How have these incidents affected you personally?
- Have these attacks on you as a politician ever led you to worry about the safety of your loved ones?

Coping strategies

- Did you tell anyone about the incidents? Why/why not?
- Did you take any actions in response to the incidents?

- Did you adopt any physical strategies in response to the incidents? E.g., changing your routines, increasing security, exercising or learning self-defence?
- Did you adopt any mental or emotional coping strategies? E.g., leaving social media, mediating, pursuing your hobbies or spending time with family and friends?
- Did you receive any support from your political party? If so, can you provide some details?
- Did you receive any support from actors in civil society? If so, can you provide some details?
- Did you receive any support from other women politicians? If so, can you provide some details?
- Are there any mechanisms available in parliament to assist women MPs facing incidents of violence, harassment or intimidation? Did you seek and/or receive support from those mechanisms? If so, can you provide some details?
- Have you ever reached out to a lawyer about these incidents? If so, can you provide some details?
- Do existing laws suffice to hold perpetrators to account? If not, are there any legal reforms that you believe would be helpful?
- What further steps should be taken to better support women politicians targeted with violence, intimidation and harassment?
- What would be the one thing that would have helped you deal with the violence or harassment better? (From institutions, others and yourself)

Impact of violence

- Did your experiences affect your political work in any way? E.g., stop you from speaking out on certain issues, affect the time you could spend representing your constituents, influence your campaign strategies?
- Did your experiences ever lead you to consider leaving politics? Why/why not?
- Did your experiences affect your personal life in any way? E.g., did they affect your personal relationships with friends or family members, or made you more apprehensive or fearful in your everyday interactions?

Wrap up

- Last but not least: Based on your experiences, what would be your advice for other women in politics on how to deal with violence, intimidation and harassment?

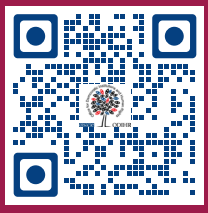
RESEARCH ETHICS

Violence is a sensitive subject for any research project. To ensure that participants were not further traumatized, the research team took several steps to ensure that the interviews were conducted in an ethical manner. Ahead of the interviews, respondents were given an 'informed consent' form detailing the aims of the project and how the interviews would be used, as well as their rights to remain anonymous, to refuse to answer certain questions, and to end the interview immediately if they so wished. The research team verified that these forms were received and signed before conducting the interviews.

On the day of each interview, the interviewer reviewed the aims of the project, explaining that the interview was intended for a publication being developed by the OSCE to learn more about the experiences of women politicians related to the violence, harassment, abuse and intimidation they face related to their political work. The interviewer also reminded participants that, in addition to gathering testimonies on their experiences, the team was especially interested in learning more about how women cope with violence, as well as the broader impact of these experiences on their lives and political careers.

The interviewers asked for verbal consent to record and transcribe the interviews for analysis, emphasizing that whole interviews would not be shared with people outside the project. They also gave the interviewees the option to remain anonymous or to have their names and photos associated with quotes and excerpts from the interviews. Before publication, each respondent was also given a copy of the quotes to be used, with the opportunity to have their names removed at that stage if they so wished, even if they had previously given their permission to use their names in the report.

In addition to adhering to standards of ethical research, the interviewers also sought to clearly communicate concern for participants' well-being. At the outset, the interviewers offered to pause the interview whenever respondents felt anxious or needed a break. At each section of the interview, they also reiterated their understanding that these topics were not always easy to talk about, thanking the participants for sharing their experiences and appreciating their trust in the research team.



EMBRACE

CHANGE

FOR GENDER EQUALITY