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Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians

Introduction

Parliaments are evolving constantly, reflecting changes in society. They need to set an example and provide a model for pluralistic, equal, peaceful and tolerant social relations. From that perspective the sharp increase in the number of women in parliament in recent years¹ represents an important step towards achieving the principles essential to democracy. The growing presence of women in parliament, once a predominantly male domain, is enabling the institution to adapt and its working methods, structures and legislative priorities to evolve.

While the influx of women into parliament is beneficial for representative democracy, it has tended to disrupt the established order, provoking some resistance. The recent IPU study on Gender-Sensitive

Parliaments² highlighted the fact that by entering the political domain women are shifting away from a role that confined them to the private sphere and are entering a world where their legitimacy is sometimes challenged.

Such resistance can take different forms, such as sexist remarks, intimidation or harassment. Directed against women in politics, such behaviour is particularly troubling. It might once have been considered "something one had to deal with" or "just part of politics," but today, throughout the world, women as well as men are increasingly calling it unacceptable, and having no place in political culture.

This Issues Brief aims to clearly identify the matters at play by analysing the results

of a first study specifically devoted to the subject of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament.³ It seeks to clarify what this phenomenon consists of, where, why and in what forms it occurs, who are the perpetrators and what is its prevalence.

It also seeks to alert parliaments to the issue and encourage them to address it, in particular by defining the issues at stake for their proper functioning, inclusiveness, representative character and willingness to achieve gender equality. It also aims to help parliaments bring about change to the world of politics, by tackling a phenomenon that is hindering women's progress towards equality and undermining the foundations of democracy.

Methodology

This Issues Brief presents the results of an IPU study on the experiences of women members of national parliaments – and on the experiences of their parliaments, as institutions.

The study is based on quantitative and qualitative data provided voluntarily by 55 women parliamentarians from 39 countries spread over five regions of the world: 18 in Africa, 15 in Europe, 10 in Asia-Pacific, 8 in the Americas and 4 in Arab countries.⁴ They represent all age groups (Table 1). Most belong to a political party (of which 58 per cent are from ruling parties and 42 per cent from opposition parties). Each of these women is unique, as are their personal, professional and political experiences.

They were interviewed about (1) their personal story; (2) their perceptions and experiences of harassment, intimidation or violence to which they may have been exposed; (3) the reasons for such acts or behaviour and the consequences that may have resulted from; and (4) solutions to prevent and address such acts. Given the sensitive nature of the issue studied, all of their responses have been treated in strict confidentiality.

The study is also based on data pertaining to policies, structures and mechanisms in place to combat unacceptable behaviour, sexual harassment and sexist violence within Parliament. These data came from 42 parliaments (53 chambers): 19 in Europe, 9 in Africa, 9 in Asia-Pacific, 4 in the Americas and 1 in Arab countries.⁵ This information provides a partial overview of what parliaments are currently doing to prevent and combat this phenomenon. Lastly, the study was informed by an analysis of the available documentation and press articles on this subject.

The study focuses on women elected to parliament without, at this stage, comparing their experience with that of their male counterparts or their parliamentary staffer. Nor does the study attempt to compare violence against women in politics with that against women in general, or to compare the experience of women parliamentarians with that of women in other professions or fields that until recently have been exclusively or predominantly held by men.

What is the issue? Concepts and definitions

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines such violence as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”⁶ Such violence affects one of every three women in the world.⁷ It may be physical, sexual, psychological or economic in nature, and no society, culture or socioeconomic class is immune to it.

According to the conceptual work done by the international campaign #NotTheCost, Stopping Violence against Women in Politics, three characteristics distinguish violence against women in politics:

- It targets women because of their gender.
- In its very form it can be gendered, as exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence.
- Its impact is to discourage women – in particular from being or becoming active in politics.⁸

Such violence clearly constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the obligation to ensure that women can participate in political processes fully, freely and in all security, as enshrined in several international instruments,

such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In addition, while behaviour and acts affecting women in politics take the form of ordinary sexism, in many cases they are often part of a broader stereotype that women “are not made for” or “should not meddle in” politics. Women engaged in or wishing to enter politics are consequently discouraged; and their access to leadership positions and their ability to fulfill their mandate as elected officials are considerably hindered.

Table 1 Age of the respondents

Age group	Response
18–30	1.8%
31–40	16.4%
41–45	10.9%
45–50	18.2%
51–60	34.5%
61–70	14.5%
71–80	3.6%

Overview of the phenomenon

The study’s findings confirm that sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians are very real and widespread. They suggest that the phenomenon knows no boundaries and exists to different degrees in every country, affecting a significant number of women parliamentarians. As shown in Table II, the study’s findings reveal troubling levels of prevalence – particularly for psychological violence, the most widely spread form, affecting **81.8 per cent** of the respondents from all countries and regions. Among the kinds of psychological violence, **44.4 per cent** of those surveyed said they had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction during their parliamentary term (Table III).

While the prevalence of other forms of violence – sexual, physical, economic – is lower, it remains troubling (Table II). Such violence affects women parliamentarians in all countries but is most acute in those moving towards, and advocating for, women’s rights, in countries marked by a general context of insecurity and/or hostility towards such rights.

Table II Prevalence of various forms of violence against women parliamentarians

Psychological violence	Yes
Have you been subjected personally to one or more acts of psychological violence?	81.8%
Have you witnessed acts of psychological violence committed against one or more of your female colleagues in parliament?	78.1%
Sexual violence	Yes
Have you been subjected to one or more acts of sexual violence?	21.8%
Have you witnessed acts of sexual violence committed against one or more of your female colleagues in parliament?	32.7%
Physical violence	Yes
Have you been subjected to one or more acts of physical violence?	25.5%
Have you witnessed acts of physical violence committed against one or more of your female colleagues in parliament?	20.0%
Economic violence	Yes
Have you been subjected to one or more acts of any type of economic violence?	32.7%
Have you witnessed acts of economic violence committed against one or more of your female colleagues in parliament?	30.9%

Psychological violence

Psychological violence encompasses of any hostile behaviour or act likely to cause psychological harm, suffering and/or fear. To limit psychological violence against women in the political realm, which is tough and even rough by nature, respondents were surveyed only about remarks, gestures and images of a sexist or humiliating sexual nature made against them and about threats and/or mobbing to which they might have been subjected.

Table III Prevalence of various manifestations of psychological violence

Humiliating sexual or sexist remarks	65.5%
Images of yourself or highly disrespectful comments with sexual connotations about you in the traditional media	27.3%
Extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of yourself spread through social media	41.8%
Threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction	44.4%
Harassment (exposure to insistent and uninvited behaviour, including unwanted attention or unwelcome verbal contact or interaction that may have frightened you)	32.7%

Among the respondents, 65.5 per cent said they had been subjected several times, or often, to **humiliating sexist remarks** during their parliamentary term. In the vast majority of cases, such remarks were made in parliament by male colleagues – from opposing parties as well as their own. Respondents said they had also been subjected to remarks of this kind on social media and, to a lesser extent, by telephone or e-mail, or during political meetings.

Respondents said they must constantly deal with stereotypical perceptions about their appearance, how they express themselves and behave and the role they should play. More generally, their excessively or insufficiently feminine demeanour is a subject of regular and widespread comment, attacks and derision. The same is true of their conjugal status, emotional, sexual and family life, imagined or real.

Coarse and misogynistic remarks about women's bodies and their appearance undermine their sense of legitimacy and competence.

A North American woman parliamentarian observed that *"they talk about your body as if to put you in your place, to prove that they don't take you seriously."*

A sub-Saharan African woman parliamentarian said that: *"male parliamentarians think it's okay to make sexually charged remarks. They don't consider female colleagues to be their equals, but only there to please them."*

Typical of other comments encountered are these: *"a chest like that must produce a lot of milk"* (sub-Saharan Africa) and *"you would be even better in a porn movie"* (Europe).

Disparaging comments about their marital status or private life, or insinuations about their sexual morality, are also common currency.

According to a European parliamentarian, to be a woman politician and single is to provoke disparaging comments: *"I receive e-mails, sometimes accompanied by pornographic images, and the message 'get out of politics; get married instead.'"*

According to an Asian parliamentarian, the fact of being married to a foreigner is used to disparage a woman's legitimacy and credibility: *"I'm treated like a traitor to the nation, a spy; I am accused of polluting the blood of my country's citizens."*

Other remarks relate to the social role expected of women, particularly as mothers and wives.

"I'm accused of being aggressive and a bad mother" and "I'm asked if I am a lesbian," confided sub-Saharan African parliamentarians.

An Asian parliamentarian had been told *"you are not the woman in your household, you are not a woman. Your husband is Mrs X."*

Latent sexism?

For long time an exclusively male seat of power, parliament is still a place where the same kinds of sexist attitudes towards women that are found throughout society sometimes occur. Respondents described daily condescension and sexism expressed through inappropriate gestures or sounds.

A European woman parliamentarian said that *"if a woman speaks loudly in parliament she is 'shushed' with a finger to the lips, as one does with children. That never happens when a man speaks loudly."*

Others describe gestures and sounds with sexual connotations, such as whistles, "air kisses", handshakes involving the suggestive use of a finger.

An Asian parliamentarian spoke of more insidious moves of a denigrating and dominating nature: *"During my first term in parliament, parliamentary authorities always referred to statements by men and gave priority to men when giving the floor to speakers."*

A European parliamentarian said that *"no one has really tried to prevent me from speaking, but I am constantly asked – even by male colleagues in my own party – if what I want to say is very important, if I could refrain from taking the floor or if I could word things differently."*

It sometimes happens that the **media** perpetuate rumours, sexist behaviour or misogynistic remarks that have the effect of denying women any political competence whatsoever. It is not unusual to see stereotypical images of women politicians that hypersexualize and dehumanize them, or that exaggerate the emotional nature of their remarks or reactions. In fact, **27.3 per cent** of the respondents believed that the traditional media had **disseminated images of or comments about them that were highly contemptuous or sexually charged**.

That proportion rose to **41.8 per cent** in the case of **images or comments disseminated through the social media** (Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, etc.). In the case of the social media, such acts are usually anonymous although the perpetrators sometimes indicate their political tendencies. It is easy, if one maintains distance and anonymity, to widely disseminate photographs doctored to carry sexual, defamatory or humiliating connotations.

Respondents from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East mentioned photomontages showing them nude, photos of them accompanied by disparaging comments, obscene drawings of their person or information published on social media suggesting that they had marital problems and failed private lives.

Other emblematic examples of psychological violence towards women parliamentarians are **threats**, usually delivered by e-mail or social media. It is often difficult to prevent or stop the dissemination of such messages and even more complicated to identify and prosecute their authors. Some **44.4 per cent** of those surveyed said they had received **threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction**. There are also threats to kidnap or kill the children of women parliamentarians.

"Someone sent me information about my son – his age, the school he attends, his class, etc. – threatening to kidnap him," one Asian parliamentarian recounted.

According to another Asian parliamentarian, *"members of the conservative parties and the extremists in society accuse me of not being a true Muslim, of making false statements, particularly when I speak about women's rights or greater women's involvement in politics. They disseminate messages through social media such as 'go ahead, kill her.'"*

Threats circulated through social media can have a domino effect and an exponential impact. The experience one European parliamentarian had to live through is one such example: *“once, over a period of four days, I received more than 500 threats of rape on Twitter.”*

Threats and acts of intimidation can extend over time and take the form of **mental harassment**. In fact, **32.7 per cent** of the respondents said they had been exposed to **insistent and aggressive behaviour of a non-sexual nature**.

According to a national study conducted in the United Kingdom, up to 58 per cent of parliamentarians have been stalked or harassed by members strangers. It is usually motivated by personal grievances or mental illness.⁹ It appears that such violence is largely shared by male and female parliamentarians. However, according to the women participating in the current study, the perpetrators of these acts include both unknown men and male parliamentary colleagues, affiliated with opposition and the women’s own political parties. The respondents generally attribute such acts not to disaffected voters or the mentally ill but to people attempting to dissuade them from political involvement. According to **52 per cent** of those who had been victims of sexist behaviour and/or violence, **the perpetrators had acted in full knowledge of the consequences**.

Sexual violence

Harassment and aggression of a sexual nature are far from being limited to the political arena. According to an international study, more than 7 per cent of women in the world have reported being victims of sexual violence committed by someone other than their spouse or partner.¹⁰ The fact that men dominate the political realm, both numerically and hierarchically, may give some of them a sense of being all-powerful conducive to sexual violence. This is particularly true where a victim’s silence is accentuated by partisan logic, and by the fact that political positions are precarious and highly coveted.

The women parliamentarians participating in the survey considered sexual harassment a common practice. Of those surveyed, **20 per cent** said they had themselves been **sexually harassed** during their term in parliament; **7.3 per cent** said that someone had tried to **force them to have sexual relations**. Others alluded to inappropriate, unwanted gestures, such as placing a hand on breasts or buttocks. Such acts had usually taken place in parliament and, to a lesser extent, during political meetings, in private life, and even during official dinners, workshops or travel abroad. The respondents said that most of these acts were committed by their male colleagues – from opposing or their own parties – rather than male voters.

Some of the respondents referred to requests from men for sexual favours in exchange for material and/or political advantages. Such forms of extortion perpetuate the idea, among women and the general public, that only by agreeing to such favours can a woman find her place and get ahead in politics.¹¹

One sub-African parliamentarian said that refusing such advances or sexual favours can lead to reprisals that may seriously impair the victim’s work: *“a female colleague in parliament confided to me that the Speaker of Parliament had requested sexual relations. Since she had refused he had never again given her the floor in parliament.”*

Physical violence

Physical violence includes any violence that inflicts bodily injury to a parliamentarian or members of her family; **20 per cent** of those surveyed responded that they had been **slapped, pushed, struck or hit with a projectile that could have injured them** during their term; **12.7 per cent** said that someone had **threatened to use or actually used a firearm, knife or other weapon against them**; and **one** of the respondents said she had been **beaten by the police** during a peaceful political rally. Such physical violence has occurred in a variety of places, but perhaps most often during or in conjunction with political meetings. The perpetrators are mostly male, and sometimes female, supporters of opposing parties, anonymous people; some are members of their own party or family, or of law enforcement.

A parliamentarian from Latin America and the Caribbean claimed to have been struck during a fight that broke out in the chamber.

A parliamentarian from sub-Saharan Africa declared that “a governor slapped me in his office and, in Parliament, I was hit in the eye by a parliamentarian from my own party.”

Attacks had also been attempted, though thwarted by bodyguards, on a number of respondents in Africa, Asia and Europe.

Economic abuse

In this regard, **14.5 per cent** of the respondents said they had been **denied funds** to which they were entitled during their terms in office (their MP’s salary indemnity, for instance), for instance); **12.7 per cent** had been **denied other resources** (offices, computers, staff, security) **enjoyed by their male colleagues in parliament**.

A parliamentarian from the Latin American and Caribbean region was denied parliamentary resources and privileges to which she was entitled as deputy leader: “I had to press to obtain a car, additional financing and security as enjoyed by my male predecessor. I obtained none of it and just gave up.”

Such financial inequities are discriminatory, handicap women parliamentarians and complicate their work. Moreover, **18.2 per cent** of the respondents had personally had their **possessions damaged or destroyed**.

Where and who?

Violence against women parliamentarians is perpetrated in traditional political venues, including parliamentary offices, constituency offices, political meetings, and the newer arenas created by social media. Of course, a spouse or other family member can also be violent towards them in their private lives, as is the case for all women.

The perpetrators of such acts of violence are not confined to a circle of political adversaries, as is common in cases of political violence, or to the usual contingent of aggressive, dissatisfied or mentally disturbed citizens. Women parliamentarians can be harassed or attacked by male colleagues in their own parties. They can also be targets of violent behaviour by community officials, religious leaders and members of their own families.

Social media: A new arena for violence against women, including women in politics

This study shows that social media have become the number one place in which psychological violence – particularly in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats – is perpetrated against women parliamentarians.

The extent of online harassment was recently confirmed by a study conducted in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom showing, to take a notable example, that Hillary Clinton has received twice as many tweets containing insults and offensive comments as Bernie Sanders during their campaigns for the Democratic Party nomination. The same was true of Julia Gillard in comparison to Kevin Rudd between January 2010 and January 2014.¹² This phenomenon is part of a rise in cyber-violence against women generally: worldwide, three quarters of female Internet users “have been exposed to some form of cyber-violence”.¹³

Why? Risk factors

In terms of the reasons or causes behind violence against the women parliamentarians surveyed, **61.5 per cent** of those who had been subjected to sexist behaviour and/or violence **believed those acts had been intended primarily to dissuade them and their female colleagues** from continuing in politics. **Political rivalry** was mentioned by only **41.7 per cent**.

According to 60.5 per cent of those surveyed, such acts are **strongly motivated by the clear-cut positions the women had taken on particular issues**. When doing so on controversial subjects, such as defending women’s rights and human rights in general, they said their activism had made them particular targets of sexist behaviour and acts of violence.

“Young and feminist women parliamentarians are particularly ignored or are the targets of symbolic attacks designed to destroy them,” said an Asian parliamentarian.

“During a debate on a law on equality in my country, women parliamentarians in the opposition were constantly insulted as women, called prostitutes, dogs, ugly hags, shameful women, crows, etc.”, another Asian parliamentarian recalled.

A woman parliamentarian’s personal experience, and the context in which she develops, can influence the forms, intensity and impact of the violence to which she may be exposed. The study identifies a number of factors that can make certain women parliamentarians more vulnerable to gender-based violent behaviours acts. Such personal and contextual factors can create additional layers of discrimination, making life extremely difficult for those affected.

Aggravating factors

- **Belonging to the opposition**

The analysis shows that belonging to the political opposition is the leading factor in increasing the exposure of women parliamentarians to all of the types of behaviour and acts of sexist violence covered in this survey.

- **Being young**

A woman’s age can also be an aggravating factor. Analysis of the findings by age group shows that women parliamentarians under 40 are targeted by more sexist remarks, intimidation, threats and degrading treatment on social media. Conversely, several of their elder female colleagues had the impression of being protected or respected because of their age and experience in politics: *“no male colleague would dare to be sexist towards a female member when I am around,”* said a European parliamentarian in her 60s.

- **Belonging to a minority group**

Membership of a minority group in their country exposes women parliamentarians to more sexist remarks and violence, often compounded by racism. The study has shed light on some troubling testimony from women politicians of foreign origin, especially in Europe, who have been particularly targeted by members of far right parties.

Such behaviour can range from insidious or condescending sexist comments, such as *“she was appointed because she is a young woman belonging to an ethnic minority”* (North America), to threats, such as *“she needs to be raped so that she knows what foreigners do”* (Europe).

A European parliamentarian of African origin recounted how a billboard in her country, paid for by far right groups, demanded that she *be “whitened with bleach and burned alive”*.

The national context – political, economic, social, cultural and religious – plays a role in determining the forms, intensity and impact of the violence to which women parliamentarians may be exposed. Given the present's study's limitations, it is not possible to evaluate whether a clear link exists between respect for women's rights in general in a given country and the sexism, harassment and violence perpetrated against the country's women parliamentarians. It can nonetheless be observed, based on the sample of respondents, that women parliamentarians who are active in advancing women's rights and operate in a national context of general insecurity or in countries where there is a clear reticence to respect women's rights and are often exposed to all forms of violence. The recourse available to them to have this violence recognized and stopped, and to seek redress for it, is in most cases quite limited.

Consequences and impact

The study does not attempt to evaluate the possible impact of sexist behaviour and/or violence on the rate at which women parliamentarians are elected and returned to office. Among the victims surveyed, on the other hand, **66.7 per cent said they had been distressed** by what had happened to them, and **46.7 per cent had feared for their security and that of their friends and family**. Such violence can in certain cases be persistent and recurrent throughout a parliamentary term, carrying a cumulative emotional and physical cost over time. This can cause women parliamentarians to reconsider the choice of running for another term. The testimony obtained from deputies speaks volumes on that point:

"It creates a lot of stress and affects your mental stability. I hesitate to run again if my personal life cannot be protected. I'm also afraid that attacks against me as a woman could destroy my image. But there is resilience," said an Asian parliamentarian.

"I have had to explain the situation to my family. My son and husband accompany me during my travels. I don't know if I will be a candidate in the next elections, because I need to think about not causing too much harm to my family," said another Asian parliamentarian.

In addition, **38.7 per cent** of the respondents having been subjected to acts of violence said the incidents had **undermined their ability to fulfill their mandates and freely express their opinions**.

Many said that they had restricted their travel and movements – *"I decided to go home early, before 7 p.m.* (African parliamentarian) – or moved only when accompanied, either always or in the case of political meetings that threaten to get out of control. Several said they tended to be more prudent, including when they speak in public, and had strengthened their security at home and work. Others had decided to block or filter e-mails, phone calls and social media accounts using a protection programme, asking staff to monitor Facebook or Twitter for them, or simply to dispense with social media altogether, depriving themselves of a forum in which to disseminate and debate their ideas.

More than half of those subjected to violence (**51.7%**) **had reported the incidents to the parliamentary security service and/or the police**. They referred to physical attacks or incidents affecting their property and also threats and hateful and defamatory remarks, particularly on social media. The respondents who had called on the police, however, had not all received unstinting support. In fact, some of those interviewed said the police had not followed up on their complaint, had refused to provide security, or had done nothing to investigate, find those responsible and prosecute them.

Violence and the insecurity it creates clearly complicate the jobs of women parliamentarians, impeding the work they are elected to do. By extension, violence also robs voters of the fruit of their representatives' work. In both cases it is democracy itself that suffers and pays the price.

And yet, **80 per cent** of respondents who had encountered behaviour and acts of sexist violence said their determination to fulfill their parliamentary mission was only strengthened and that such behaviour and acts would not prevent them from running for another term. The strong determination displayed by the survey participants should be placed in perspective, however: other national and regional studies have demonstrated the negative impact of violence, pushing women to abandon their political positions or decide against running in future elections.¹⁴ The impact of such violence, moreover, goes far beyond the people directly affected, discouraging women in general from participating in politics.¹⁵ When women decide that the risk to themselves and their families is too great, their participation in politics suffers, as do the representative character of government and the democratic process as a whole.

Responses and solutions

Recognizing the problem, talking about it and making it visible

“No. That is not part of the political culture!”

“You have to get used to it, it’s the political culture,” a sub-Saharan African parliamentarian said during the study. There is a tenacious idea that one must “deal with it” and that it is up to women parliamentarians to adapt to a political environment that condones sexism and/or fails to recognize or give importance to sexual harassment.

Another sub-Saharan African parliamentarian summed it up as follows: *“I have not even bothered to react to the sexist remarks made to me. It is the norm. If you react, everyone says ‘So what? Big deal!’”*

Some women parliamentarians may not want to show signs of weakness or appear as victims. Others may be afraid to complain about harassers who are powerful figures within their parties.

“We need to admit that it is a problem. Then, there are many ways to solve it.” This observation by a sub-Saharan African parliamentarian reminds us that it is essential to recognize that sexist behaviour and gender-based violence have no place in politics.

Recognizing the existence of the problem, naming it and breaking the silence about it opens the way for effective solutions. Such recognition by the State, and by parliaments, political parties, parliamentarians and citizens, is fundamental. Parliaments and politicians, male and female, must say loud and clear that such behaviour has no place in the political culture and will not be tolerated in parliament. Female and male politicians also have a particular responsibility to denounce such behaviour and reject sexist violence in other contexts.

Having strong and strictly enforced laws on gender equality and violence against women

It is essential to have strong and strictly enforced laws on gender equality and violence against women. The first step is to create a conducive environment and the mechanisms necessary for women, including women parliamentarians, to report and lodge complaints against all forms of discrimination and gender-based violence – affecting themselves or others known to them. This legislative framework can be the same for all women, or it can feature specific provisions for women in politics. Very few countries to date have enacted legislation specifically on violence against women in the political arena. It is also necessary for laws to be complete and cover new forms of violence, particularly online threats and other forms of cyber-violence.

Specific law against harassment and political violence against women

In 2012, Bolivia adopted a law on harassment and political violence against women, providing for sanctions against any physical, psychological or sexual aggression or any form of pressure, persecution, harassment or threat towards a woman elected to or holding public office.¹⁶ Mexico followed this example by amending its law on violence against women and its electoral legislation to incorporate a definition of acts of political violence against women.¹⁷ In May 2016, the Bolivian law was bolstered by a decision of the Ministry of Justice to prohibit people with backgrounds of violence against women from running for political office.¹⁸ It will be necessary to follow closely the application of these initiatives and their impact on the prevailing levels of impunity and on the conditions conducive to women’s participation in political processes at all levels.

Clearly, national laws can be effective only if they are properly enforced, made known to women and effectively invoked by them to protect their rights.

Countering online threats and other forms of cyber-violence

Some of the women parliamentarians interviewed wondered how seriously they should take such threats or whether just to ignore them. However, their harassers on the web are real people, and some of their behaviour is criminal. One European parliamentarian was forthcoming on this point:

“Complaints must be filed against all abuses as soon as they appear to be criminal in nature, such as threats of death or rape. In two cases my complaints led to criminal convictions. After I reported several death threats that I had received, the police took security measures.”

In England, in 2014, a man was condemned to 18 weeks of prison for bombarding a female parliamentarian on Twitter with messages characterized by the justice system as “indecent, obscene and threatening.”¹⁹

Reporting and calling public attention to online threats and insults through traditional and social media was said by some of the respondents to produce good results. Others considered such strategies delicate and potentially counterproductive.

Strengthening internal mechanisms in parliament

“Five years ago, a male parliamentarian was accused of harassing several female colleagues. The matter was frankly debated in parliament, which spread awareness about the problem and changed mentalities. After that, the sexist jokes and unacceptable behaviour stopped,” one European parliamentarian recalled.

It is essential to recognize that the problem exists or can exist in parliament as in any place of work. Respondents stressed the need for rigorous and properly applied internal policies and mechanisms to keep parliaments free of sexism, sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Standing orders and codes of conduct

Only **35.8 per cent** of the parliaments participating in the study said their institutions' regulations or codes of conduct contained provisions governing unacceptable member behaviour or acts of intimidation to which women parliamentarians might be subjected. Only four of those parliaments – those of South Africa, Canada, Costa Rica and Thailand – have provisions that explicitly protect members against sexist remarks, sexual harassment and threats of violence from other members. In other parliaments the standing orders and codes are intended to maintain order and a certain decorum, prohibiting insulting and vulgar comments and unacceptable behaviour – but without particular distinction between men and women. The application of these provisions and their interpretation from the perspective of gender equality thus depends generally on the political will of the person presiding over the plenary or committee chamber: *“it is fundamental for parliamentary authorities to neither accept nor to tolerate disparaging remarks or sexist jokes about women”*, one Asian parliamentarian stressed.

However, that is not always the case. One of the parliamentarians surveyed told how she had demanded a point of order from the Speaker after a colleague had insulted her in a sexist way. The Speaker rejected her motion, saying: *“I cannot control what another member thinks of you.”*

Sexual harassment policy and complaint settlement procedures

Only **21.2 per cent** of the parliaments participating in the study said they had a policy on sexual harassment against members of parliament; **28.3 per cent** said they had a procedure for settling complaints. For parliamentary staff, **48.1 per cent** of these same parliaments said they had a sexual harassment policy in place, and **52.8 per cent** said they had a procedure for settling complaints about such harassment.

Most of the parliaments said that the penal code, labour code or other national laws on sexual harassment and violence applied to parliamentarians as to any other citizens.

Sometimes it is only when a harassment case involving parliamentarians comes to light that one can perceive the procedural flaws that dissuade women parliamentarians from lodging complaints. It was after such experiences that the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica and the Canadian House of Commons, to take two examples, adopted sexual harassment policies and complaint procedures for their members. Other parliaments said they delegated the function of dealing with sexual harassment complaints to internal organs (the Joint Committee on Ethics and Members' Interests in South Africa and a special commission in Thailand, for instance).

A parliamentarian from North Africa spoke about an internal committee with responsibility for receiving complaints. A parliamentarian from sub-Saharan Africa said her political party had a disciplinary committee for sexual harassment, which was perceived as a serious offence, punishable by dismissal. Others said political party whips should be the ones to apply sanctions for improper behaviour.

While it is not incumbent on parliaments or political parties to assume the role of tribunals, judging acts of a criminal nature, it is their duty to ensure that women politicians can work in security and, where necessary, lodge complaints without fear of unwelcome sexual conduct detrimental to the work environment. Anything that discourages and silences complaints encourages the persistence of such behaviour with impunity.

Parliamentary codes of conduct with respect to sexual harassment: the examples of Costa Rica and Canada

The aim of the initiatives in these two countries is to have a complaint mechanism that is independent of the political process. In Costa Rica, *“the commission responsible for investigating cases is composed of the parliament's director of human resources, a health professional and an attorney, as well as their alternates. This commission can ask the Mediator of the Republic to make available a specialist in this area for support at the start of proceedings. Parliamentarians, in parallel with this procedure, need to file a complaint with the court.”*

In Canada, the procedure is confidential. Complaints or requests for mediation are addressed first to the human resources director for the House of Commons. The director can hire an external investigator to determine whether sexual harassment has occurred. In addition, all House Members must now sign a document undertaking to keep the work environment free of sexual harassment and to respect the code of conduct in that regard. Training sessions on the sexual harassment policy are also organized for MPs and employees.²⁰

Maintaining security in parliament

Parliaments are responsible for creating a safe and protective environment for all their members and staff, men and women. The role of parliamentary security services, their ability to collaborate with the police and the serious manner in which they can counsel and support women parliamentarians who have been threatened or attacked is essential. Members of these services must be trained in and sensitized to how to respond to gender-based violence. They may decide to conduct a security audit of parliamentary premises and constituency offices to evaluate whether additional measures are necessary to ensure the security of parliamentarians and their staff, particularly women – especially when they are required to work late into the night or to deal with very aggressive people.

Referral to the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians

In 1976, the IPU established a Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, responsible for examining the cases of parliamentarians whose fundamental rights are violated or the exercise of whose functions is hindered by arbitrary measures while in office. Such cases may include violations of parliamentary immunity or of freedom of opinion and expression, and attacks, threats, other acts of intimidation, torture and assassination.

In 2015 the Committee examined the cases of 320 parliamentarians in 43 countries, including 37 women parliamentarians.²¹ This latter figure, however, may simply be the tip of the iceberg. As this study shows, some rights violations are specific to women parliamentarians: these should be brought more systematically before the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, to help prevent and eliminate sexism and violence against women in parliaments.

Changing the political culture

The increase in the number of women in parliament, and solidarity among them, are helping to change mentalities and the political culture. Having more women active in parliament can have the effect of changing the work atmosphere and gradually modifying the behaviour and mentality of male colleagues, enabling women to fulfill their mandates and serve their constituents freely and safely. To quote the words of an Asian parliamentarian: *“when so many women came into Parliament in 2006 it was not unusual to hear comments such as “you are all prostitutes.” Today the situation is better. Women have opened the way for other women.”*

Role of solidarity among women parliamentarians

According to the survey data, **71.4 per cent** of the respondents said they had turned first to their female colleagues, their spouse and/or family to talk about inappropriate behaviour or acts to which they had been subjected, seeking aid and counsel.

In recent years, there have been some public examples of this solidarity among women parliamentarians, making it possible to shine a light on such violence and put a stop to sexism in politics. Women parliamentarians from one European country sent a letter to the media in solidarity with colleagues, including the Speaker, who had been attacked, insulted and threatened on social media.²²

Women from another European country testified jointly and publicly in the media about attacks and acts of sexual harassment committed by a high-ranking colleague in their political party. By raising their voices, they had broken through the code of silence and convinced justice officials to investigate their allegations.²³

The study also showed that networks of women parliamentarians can be good places to confide with colleagues and find solutions. One Clerk of Parliament said that the fact of being a woman encouraged other women parliamentarians to seek help from leadership in stopping inappropriate behaviour that would otherwise prevent them from doing their work in full security.

The fact remains that the problem is and should be the business of everyone, men and women. The solidarity expressed by male parliamentarians won over to the cause of equality is decisive. Men are an essential component of the solutions to be implemented; they need to be actively involved in the debate and commit themselves fully to the elimination of sexism and discrimination in politics. They need to take a stand and assume their responsibilities alongside women.

For that to happen, “men need to be educated about equality between men and women, including the benefits to be gained from women’s presence in parliament;” one sub-Saharan African parliamentarian stressed.

The establishment of partnerships with civil society organizations and the media is another possible way to denounce unacceptable behaviour and encourage public debate on ways to make politics more inclusive.

Education as a means of changing mentalities and cultures, combat discrimination and establish a culture of equality and tolerance, was advocated by several respondents. Teaching boys and girls from the earliest age about human rights and gender equality will help to establish relations of non-violent and respect between the sexes in all sectors.

“Men and women need to be educated from earliest childhood about mutual respect and respect for differences and the ideas of others;” (Parliamentarian from an Arab country).

“Public awareness needs to be heightened about the laws and policies in effect; women must learn to file complaints and the police and relevant personnel need to be trained not to minimize acts of violence against women.” (European Parliamentarian)

Lastly, several participants in the study think that more action needs to be taken vis-à-vis the media, particularly by training journalists in the non-sexist treatment of women parliamentarians and politicians.

Conclusions

The study has revealed a troubling prevalence of gender-based violence against women parliamentarians throughout the world. This includes not only psychological violence, deplorable wherever it occurs, but also other forms of violence – sexual, physical and economic. Even allowing for the complexity of the experiences recounted by the women surveyed, and the contexts in which they occurred – particularly given the survey's international character – these findings suggest that such behaviour against women parliamentarians exists, to varying degrees, in every country, affecting a significant number of elected officials. Such violence impedes the ability of women parliamentarians to do their work freely and securely and has a dissuading effect on women's political engagement in general.

The study also shows, however, that once the phenomenon is visible and recognized, solutions either exist or can be found or invented. Such behaviour must no longer be viewed as just the price to be paid for political involvement. It is the duty of political actors, men and women, and of parliaments as institutions to set the right examples. They need to put some order in their own houses if they do not wish to help legitimize discrimination and violence against women in all other spheres of life, public as well as private. The effectiveness of parliaments, progress toward gender equality and the vitality of democracy itself all depend on it.

Notes

- 1 According to IPU data, women's share of parliamentary membership increased from 11.3 per cent in 1995 to 22.8 per cent in 2016 (as of 1 August 2016), www.ipu.org/wmn-f/world.htm.
- 2 *Gender-sensitive parliaments: a global review of good practices*, Geneva, IPU, 2011.
- 3 Violence against women in politics can also manifest itself among voters and candidates in elections, against militants within political parties and civil society organizations, and against women elected or serving as public officials at local and other levels.
- 4 Most of the interviews were conducted in March 2016 during the parliamentary meeting jointly organized by IPU and UN Women on the occasion of the 60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (New York) and during the 134th IPU Assembly (Lusaka). Other interviews were also conducted, through May 2016, by telephone or Skype.
- 5 A questionnaire was distributed to members of the Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments (ASGP) during their meeting in Lusaka in March 2016, and then by email in June 2016.
- 6 *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women, UN General Assembly resolution 48/104*, 1993.
- 7 *Global and regional estimates of violence against women*, Geneva, WHO, 2013.
- 8 *#NotTheCost: stopping violence against women in politics: a call to action*, Washington, DC, National Democratic Institute (NDI), 2016. In 2016, NDI launched an international campaign called *#NotTheCost, Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics*, based on an alliance of partner organizations fighting against violence against women active in politics. IPU was part of this alliance.
- 9 James DV, Sukhwai S, Farnham FR, Evans J, Barrie C, Taylor A and Wilson SP. Harassment and stalking of members of the United Kingdom Parliament: associations and consequences, *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 19 January 2016.
- 10 *Global and regional estimates of violence against women*, Geneva, WHO, 2013.
- 11 *#NotTheCost: stopping violence against women in politics: a call to action*, Washington, DC, National Democratic Institute (NDI), 2016.
- 12 Hunt E, Evershed N, Liu R. From Julia Gillard to Hillary Clinton: online abuse of politicians around the world, *The Guardian*, 27 June 2016. www.theguardian.com/technology/datablog/ng-interactive/2016/jun/27/from-julia-gillard-to-hillary-clinton-online-abuse-of-politicians-around-the-world.
- 13 *Cyber Violence against Women and Girls - A report by the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on broadband and Gender*, 2015. See also The Guardian's analysis of 70 million comments made on its site since 2006. It was discovered that out of the 10 authors/journalists who had received the most disparaging comments, eight were women; the two men were black. The Guardian, *The dark side of Guardian comments*, 12 April 2016. www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments.
- 14 Violent incidents have discouraged women politicians in Asia and Latin America, dissuading them from running for election and pushing them to leave office prematurely [Herrera, Morena, Mitzy Arias and Sara García. 2011. *Hostilidad y violencia política: develando realidades de mujeres autoridades municipales*. Saint Domingue: UN Women; South Asia Partnership International. 2006. *Violence Against Women in Politics*. Lalitpur: SAP-Nepal Publishing House]. One third of women politicians locally elected in Sweden said that they wished to leave office because of such incidents [Krantz, Joakim, Lisa Wallin and Sanna Wallin. 2012. *Politikernas trygghetsundersökning 2012*. Stockholm: Brottsförebyggande rådet]. In Bolivia 48 per cent of the women who left office in 2010 said they had been victims of such violence [ACOBOL. 2012. *Acoso y violencia política en razón de género afectan el trabajo político y gestión pública de las mujeres*. www.acobol.org.bo], in NDI, *#NotTheCost, Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics: A Call to Action*, 2016].
- 15 In Australia, 60 per cent of women between the ages of 18 and 21, and 80 per cent of women over 31, said they were less likely to become candidates after observing the extent to which women were disparaged in the media. [Shepherd, Tory. 2014. *More women turning off politics after Julia Gillard was badly treated*. *Advertiser*, 14 January]. Nearly all of the participants in a British programme on potential leaders said they had witnessed online sexist abuses against women politicians. More than 75 per cent of them said this was a concern in deciding whether or not to continue in public life [www.fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/FootstepsInTheSand_lo.pdf], in NDI, *#NotTheCost, Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics: A Call to Action*, 2016].
- 16 Bolivia, *Ley contra el acoso y violencia política hacia las mujeres*, 2012.
- 17 Mexico, *Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencias et Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales*, 2013.
- 18 Krook ML. *Violence against women in politics: a rising threat to democracy worldwide*, article presented to the 24th World Congress of Political Science, Poznan, Poland, 23–28 July 2016.
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- 20 Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Commons: Sexual Harassment, 38th Report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, 41st Parliament, Second Session, www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=8030727&Language=F.
- 21 www.ipu.org/pdf/Violations_HR_2015_A3_Fr_WEB.PDF.
- 22 Open letter published in the *Journal La Repubblica*, on 18 June 2016, by members of the Italian interparliamentary group for women, rights and equal opportunity.
- 23 Focraud A. *Affaire Baupin: le parquet ouvre une enquête préliminaire*, JDD, 10 May 2016.

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ISBN: 978-92-9142-662-1

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We thank all the women parliamentarians and the staff of parliaments who participated in this survey.

IPU gratefully acknowledges the contribution of Brigitte Filion who drafted the text of this report.

Our thanks also go to Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for their financial support.