

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

Tool 1

INTRODUCTION to Violence against Women in Politics



**Addressing Violence Against Women in
Politics in the OSCE Region Toolkit**
Tool 1: Introduction to Violence Against
Women in Politics



Acknowledgments: The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) would like to thank Ajla van Heel Merdanovic, an ODIHR international consultant, for drafting Tool 1 – Introduction to Violence against Women in Politics.

ODIHR also recognizes the researchers, practitioners and experts from academia, international organizations and civil society working in the OSCE region and beyond who have provided substantive inputs and advice for this toolkit. ODIHR acknowledges especially Rachel Weston Eschenbacher and Lana Ackar of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and Associate Professor Elin Bjarnegård from Uppsala University who provided written feedback to this Tool.

Addressing Violence Against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region Toolkit
Tool 1: Introduction to Violence Against Women in Politics

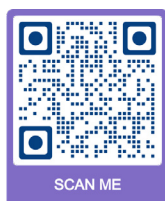
Warsaw, 2022
OSCE/ODIHR

Published by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)
ul. Miodowa 10
00-251 Warsaw
Poland
www.osce.org/odihr

© OSCE/ODIHR 2022 All rights reserved. The contents of this publication may be freely used and copied for educational and other non-commercial purposes, provided that any such reproduction is accompanied by an acknowledgement of the OSCE/ODIHR as the sources.

ISBN: 978-83-66690-82-0

Designed by Michael Lusaba
Illustrations by Aida Herceg



Contents

Foreword	01
Executive Summary	02
An Introduction to Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region	05
What is Violence against Women in Politics?	08
The Prevalence and Impact of Violence against Women in Politics	14
Effective Ways to Address Violence against Women in Politics	18
Prevention	18
Protection	20
Prosecution	24
Coordinated policies	25
Preventing Violence against Women in Politics – Everyone Has a Role to Play	27
Further Reading and References	28

Foreword

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 and as a threat to human security. Yet, it is prevalent across the OSCE region and it is especially, but not exclusively, affecting young, disabled, ethnic minority women. Women are targeted with violence not only for their political views but also to prevent current and aspiring women politicians from engaging in politics and decision-making altogether. Violence is not a price women should have to pay in order to enjoy their political and civil rights. In addition to individual suffering and violation of women's rights, this violence weakens democratic governance, political pluralism and the inclusivity of public institutions.

OSCE participating States have recognized that the full and equal exercise of women's human rights is essential to achieving a more peaceful, prosperous and democratic OSCE region. Additionally, all States have committed to eliminating discrimination against women, including gender-based violence. States need to criminalize violence against women in all its forms, ensure access to justice, support and protection for those facing violence and hold perpetrators accountable.

Along with the OSCE participating States, ODIHR is committed to advancing women's equal and meaningful participation in political and public life. Preventing violence against women in politics is crucial to meeting this commitment. ODIHR stands ready to support participating States and their democratic institutions, to address systematically violence against women in politics through law- and policymaking, capacity-building, awareness-raising and cooperation with civil society.

This toolkit provides recommendations for legislators, governments, parliaments and political parties as well as guidance for civil society and women politicians affected by violence. It consolidates existing definitions and compiles examples of promising practices on preventing violence against women in politics from a variety of States. The toolkit is based upon international standards and OSCE commitments.

I hope this publication will be widely used by politicians, parliaments, political parties, gender equality advocates and civil society representatives across the OSCE region to prevent violence against women in politics and to advance gender equality to make politics safe and fair to men and women in all their diversity.

Matteo Mecacci

Director, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Executive Summary

Violence against women in politics¹ is a growing problem for women across the OSCE region and around the globe. As much as it is part of the broader issue of endemic violence against women, it is also fuelled strongly by today's global politics. Exacerbated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the democratic backsliding and backlashes against rule of law, human rights and gender equality in some OSCE participating States, have led to increased political polarization, intolerance, misogyny and violence, online and offline.²

As a human rights violation and a barrier to women's political participation, violence against women in politics presents a serious challenge to democracy and the peace and security of OSCE participating States. When women assume their rightful place in politics, their presence, voices and legitimacy are often challenged violently; as a means to preserve male privilege and positions of power.³ Women are not targeted for their political views but specifically for being women, to deter them from political engagement. This is not only harmful to the women in politics but also to those close to them and to those considering similar political engagement.⁴ The majority of the perpetrators are men; often even from the same political party.⁵

While largely under-researched and under-reported, violence against women in politics is prevalent. It is worse for women with intersecting identities such as those from ethnic minorities, with disabilities, or subject to ageism. The violence takes different forms — physical, sexual, psychological, economic and symbolic (see page 12). The latter largely dominates online.

1 This toolkit limits the definition of 'women in politics' to those serving in formal political roles, such as candidates, members of political parties as well as elected and appointed officials.

2 "Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians: A Growing Crisis", OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Special Representative on Gender Issues, Annual Report 2021, p. 5, <<https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4247-2021-report-by-the-special-representative-on-gender-issues-violence-against-women-journalists-and-politicians-a-growing-crisis/file>>.

3 Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "The Law and Violence against Women in Politics", presented at the 24th World Congress of the International Political Science Association, Poznan, Poland, 23-28 July 2016, <https://16dayscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/law_and_violence_against_women_in_politics.pdf>.

4 Political scientists have also looked into and researched extensively political violence and its gendered aspects. Political violence also undermines politicians' representation, voice and agency in politics. See for example Gabrielle Bardall et al, "How is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts", *Political Studies*, Volume: 68 issue: 4, pp. 916-935, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719881>>.

5 "Not the Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics, A Renewed Call to Action", National Democratic Institute (NDI), 6 May 2021, p. 46, <<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NTC%202021%20ENGLISH%20FINAL.pdf>>.

Violence against women in politics differs from political violence in that it is gendered, often sexualized, and has a chilling effect, deterring current and future generations of women from representation, voice, and agency in politics. It also has a detrimental impact on plurality and the inclusion of different needs, issues and topics in the political agenda.

OSCE participating States “have an obligation to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish the perpetrators of violence against women and girls and to provide protection to the victims, and ... failure to do so violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”⁶ Similarly, CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35 emphasizes the obligation of States to “tackle gender-based violence against women..., including (by) having laws, institutions and a system in place to address such violence,” while highlighting that “the failure of a State Party to take all appropriate measures to prevent acts of gender-based violence against women..., or to investigate, to prosecute and punish perpetrators and to provide reparations to victims/survivors of such acts, provides tacit permission or encouragement to perpetrate acts of gender-based violence against women. Such failures or omissions constitute human rights violations.”⁷ The CEDAW Committee also explicitly defines gender-based violence as discrimination against women, and the States Parties to the CEDAW Convention are legally obliged to pursue all appropriate measures to eliminate any forms of discrimination against women, including violence against women.⁸

Targeted action and collaborative intervention is required to address violence against women in politics. OSCE participating States are called upon to “ensure access to justice, effective investigation, prosecution of perpetrators, as well as provide (...) adequate protection (...) for victims of all forms of violence against women and girls.”⁹ Alongside participating States’ obligation to address violence against women in politics, specific institutions, such as parliaments, political parties, and civil society organizations can play, individually and together, an important role in addressing this phenomenon; ensuring accountability, and supporting those affected, within the bounds of their institutional framework and responsibilities.

Like other organizations and practitioners, in recent years the OSCE has strengthened its efforts to address violence against women in politics, within the framework of its broader mandate to promote women’s participation in political and public life as well as through its observation of elections.

6 Ministerial Council Decision 15/05 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, OSCE, 6 December 2005, Preamble, <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/8/17451.pdf>>.

7 General Recommendation 35, Art. 2, CEDAW, United Nations, 26 July 2017, <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1305057?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>>.

8 General Recommendation No. 19 and CEDAW Convention Art. 1 and 2, United Nations, CEDAW, 1992.

9 Ministerial Council Decision 4/18 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, OSCE, 7 December 2018, Art. 1, <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/e/406019.pdf>>.

This Toolkit for Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region is just one example of the OSCE's increased efforts to eliminate violence against women in politics.

The Toolkit aims to raise awareness and strengthen the capacities of OSCE participating States in developing effective measures to address violence against women in politics. It consists of five separate tools:

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, the 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.

The Toolkit draws on existing definitions, the international normative framework, OSCE and regional commitments and examples of good practice on violence against women in politics. This material comes from desk research, small-scale surveys, peer and expert exchanges, the experiences of women politicians who have faced such violence (Tool 5) and OSCE's programmatic expertise and collaboration. It is a practical guide rather than an academic reference work. ODIHR recognizes that the list of those responsible for or affected by such violence goes beyond the four groups targeted with this Toolkit, and may consider expanding its target audiences in the future, for example to cover the role of media or role of men in addressing violence against women in politics.

An Introduction to Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region

In the wake of the #MeToo movement and ensuing public debate, violence committed against women in politics and in the public sphere more broadly has attracted more attention. Women politicians, public officials, journalists, and human rights defenders are exposed to violence while doing their jobs, “reflecting the possible confluence of increased political polarity across the OSCE region with the ongoing pervasiveness of misogyny”.¹⁰ Data on the prevalence of violence against women in politics is not systematically collected in the OSCE region or beyond. However, the topic has gained increased importance due to women speaking more openly and publicly about it, the media giving increased visibility to cases, governments offering stronger political commitment and some practical measures to address it, and international organizations strengthening the international normative framework and knowledge exchange on the topic.

A distinct form of gender-based violence, violence against women in politics targets women not for their political views, but simply for being women, ultimately aiming to stop them from being heard and publicly active.¹¹ Besides compromising the individual safety of those affected, this also deters women as *women* from participating in politics and accessing power.¹² In turn, researchers of political violence emphasize the importance of exploring *gendered political violence* and how this includes different gendered motives, gendered forms and gendered impacts. In addition, for women being targeted in politics just because they are women, these researchers argue that *gendered forms* of political violence highlight “how gender roles and tropes differentially shape men’s and women’s experiences of political violence”, and how *gendered impacts* “capture the subjective meaning-making processes that occur as different audiences react to political violence”.¹³

10 Van Heel Merdanovic, “Promoting Women’s Participation in Political and Public Life in the OSCE Region”, OSCE/ODIHR Discussion Paper for the Sixty-fifth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 65), Expert Group Meeting, 1 October 2020, p. 4, <<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/65/EGM/Van%20Heel%20bserver%20Paper%20on%20WPP%20in%20OSCE%20Region.pdf>>.

11 *Op. cit.*, note 4, pp. 916-935.

12 See for example: Mona Lena Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*, (USA, Oxford University Press 2020).

13 See for example, “How is Political Violence Gendered?” *op. cit.*, note 4.

As a result of both violence against women in politics and gendered political violence, the chilling effect of violence is stopping women and girls from taking active roles in politics and wider society, and prevents them from living their lives freely and to their full potential. This Toolkit will use and refer to the term ‘violence against women in politics’ in line with OSCE and international standards.

The OSCE views “violence against women and girls in all its forms (as) one of the most pervasive impediments to their full enjoyment of all human rights and to women’s full, equal and effective participation in political, economic, and public life.”¹⁴ Any violence that prevents women from exercising their right to participate on equal terms in political and public affairs, to vote, run for office, campaign freely, be elected, associate, assemble, or freely speak out and give their opinion is a violation of their rights and has a detrimental impact on society. It undermines our political and electoral processes, impedes the work and credibility of our public institutions, weakens policy outcomes, and stalls and undermines women’s political participation, our democracies, human rights, peace and security.¹⁵

Violence against women in politics cannot be accepted as the cost of doing politics, and states have a responsibility to address it systemically. Preventing violence against women in politics through awareness-raising, the provision of adequate support, protection, and recourse to those affected, holding perpetrators accountable, ending impunity, and finding effective and innovative policies and partnerships is the way to address this global epidemic. Strengthening women’s political representation more broadly can change the way politics and decision-making is done in the long run, in turn balancing power relations and reducing violence.

Examples of violence against women presidential candidates

Klara Sooronkulova, a candidate in the 2021 presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan, reported receiving threats while campaigning. She gave security issues and limited finances as a reason for not campaigning in the regions.

In the week following **Kamala Harris’** nomination as vice-presidential candidate in the United States, the sexualized hashtag #heelsupharris appeared 35,479 times in Twitter posts, according to analysis by the media intelligence platform Zignal Labs.

¹⁴ Ministerial Council Decision 4/18, *op. cit.*, note 9.

¹⁵ See also International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, UN OHCHR, 16 December 1966, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>>.

Violence against women in politics is also a security issue. OSCE participating States have recognized that the “full and equal exercise by women of their human rights is essential to achieving a more peaceful, prosperous, and democratic OSCE area.”¹⁶ Additionally, OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 4/2018 “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.”¹⁷

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is mandated to support OSCE participating States in “ensuring equal opportunity for participation of women in political and public life (and) developing best practices.”¹⁸ Collaborating with OSCE Field Operations, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and others, ODIHR provides technical support, knowledge and expertise to parliaments, political parties and civil society organizations, and empowers women themselves to be able to participate, violence-free, in politics and decision-making. ODIHR also conducts election observation in OSCE participating States, which includes assessment of the participation and experiences of women in electoral processes. Furthermore, ODIHR is currently updating its election observation methodology to strengthen the monitoring of gendered aspects of election observation, including violence, in election observation missions and activities. In 2021, with UN Women, ODIHR organized a Side-Event on Violence against Women in Politics, on the margins of the 65th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, followed by an online advocacy campaign implemented together with OSCE Field Operations.¹⁹ ODIHR also commissioned and supported three country-specific studies on violence against women in politics — for Poland, Serbia, and Kyrgyzstan — in collaboration with the OSCE Mission to Serbia and the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek.²⁰ OSCE’s 2021 Human Dimension Seminar on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Girls included a specific working session on Violence against Women in Political and Public Life, providing an opportunity for OSCE participating States, civil society and practitioners to discuss implementation of OSCE commitments and ways forward.²¹

16 Ministerial Council Decision 14/04: OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, Art. 1, 7 December 2004, <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/d/23295.pdf>>.

17 Ministerial Council Decision 4/18, *op. cit.*, note 9, Preamble and Art. 7.

18 Ministerial Council Decision 14/04, *op. cit.*, note 16, Art. 44 d.

19 Violence Against Women in Politics: Experiences and Ways Forward for Women Leaders, ODIHR and UN Women, Side Event to the 65th Meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65), 17 March 2021, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/479960>>.

20 Małgorzata Druciarek, Aleksandra Niżyńska, “It has become so pervasive that I keep forgetting about it”, Violence against women on the Polish political scene”, Institute of Public Affairs, 2021, <<https://www.isp.org.pl/en/publications/it-has-become-so-pervasive-that-i-keep-forgetting-about-it-violence-against-women-on-the-polish-political-scene>>, and Marija Babović et al., “Report on Gender-based Violence against Women Politicians in Serbia”, ODIHR, January 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/2/500611_0.pdf>; Z. Kochorbayeva, N. Prigoda, B. Islanbekova, M. Tyulegenov, “Violence against women in politics in the Kyrgyz Republic: Results of study”, Social Technologies Agency, funded/supported by OSCE/ODIHR, 2 June 2022, <<https://www.osce.org/programme-office-in-bishkek/519390>>.

21 Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Girls: Human Dimension Seminar, ODIHR, 16-17 November 2021, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/hds_2021>.

Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians was also the focus of the 2021 annual report of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Special Representative on Gender Issues.²² This Toolkit for Addressing Violence against Women in politics in the OSCE Region aims to raise awareness and strengthen the knowledge and capacities of OSCE participating States to implement effective measures to address and respond to violence against women in politics. It offers an **Introduction** to violence against women in politics, analysing its prevalence and impact, and providing solutions for effective prevention, protection, prosecution and coordinated policies. The Toolkit offers four separate and specific tools. The **Tools for Parliaments, Political Parties, and Civil Society** focus on these specific actors and provide practical guidance, a spectrum of possible measures, examples of good practice, and checklists for action to facilitate systemic interventions, innovative solutions and partnerships. The **Tool for Women in Politics** is a guide for women affected directly or indirectly by such violence about how to seek protection, remedy and support.

The term 'violence against women *in politics*', indicates that our democratic institutions and political processes are at the heart of this growing problem and are also the key to finding adequate solutions. States — their democratic institutions, parliaments and political parties — have a vital role in ensuring a safe political environment, free from violence, for all involved. They must also facilitate access to justice and support services for women experiencing or reporting violence while doing their jobs in politics. Civil society organizations, including women's movements, often serve as the bridge between those in power and individuals. They have repeatedly sounded the alarm on this issue, called for action and provided services to those affected. Women in politics and aspiring to be in politics need to be supported and empowered to find protection, remedy, and to make informed decisions about their own personal response to violence against women in politics. ODIHR's Toolkit aims to support these efforts.

WHAT IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS?

Violence against women in politics is any gender-based act or threat of violence intended specifically to obstruct women's political participation because they are women.²³ 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."²⁴

²² "Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians", *op. cit.*, note 2.

²³ Krook, *op. cit.*, note 12, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Defining such violence as a distinct form of gender-based violence also implies a specific bias and/or discriminatory element against women in politics. It 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 most commonly understood today to encompass four types of violence — physical, sexual, psychological, and economic — experienced by women in the political sphere. The current definitions of violence against women in politics largely draw on existing international commitments for addressing violence against women (see the box below), expanding them to the political arena. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women states, “violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to (...) physical, sexual and psychological violence.”²⁵ Adding a political lens and pioneering a legal definition almost a decade ago, Bolivian Law No. 243 on Harassment and Political Violence against Women defines violence as “physical, psychological, or sexual actions, behaviours, and/or aggressions” intended to restrict a woman's actions and her exercise of political rights.²⁶

International standards and OSCE commitments related to violence against women, including in politics

- OSCE Ministerial Council Decisions No. 14/04 - OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, 2004; No. 15/05 on preventing and combating violence against women, 2005; No. 7/09 on Women's Political Participation in Political and Public Life; No. 7/14 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, 2014; and No. 4/18 Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, 2018; OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Resolution on combating violence against women journalists and politicians, Birmingham, 2022
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979; General recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, 2013; the General recommendation No. 35, 2017, on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19, 1992
- UN General Assembly resolution 48/104: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993; UN General Assembly resolution 66/130: Women and political participation, 2011; UN General Assembly resolution 73/148: Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: sexual harassment, 2018; the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Goal 5), 2015

25 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, United Nations General Assembly resolution 48/104, 20 December 1993: “Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following: (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence.” Art. 2a, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.21_declaracion%20eliminacion%20vaw.pdf>.

26 Bolivia. 2012. Law No. 243 on Harassment and Political Violence against Women. Art. 7 and 8. <https://www.comunicacion.gob.bo/sites/default/files/docs/Ley%20N%C2%BA243%20Contra%20el%20Acoso%20y%20Violencia%20Politica%20hacia%20las%20Mujeres.pdf>

- The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995
- The International Labour Organization (ILO): Convention concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (No. 190), 2019 and Violence and Harassment Recommendation (No. 206), 2019
- The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210; the Istanbul Convention), 2011 and the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (to the Istanbul Convention - GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women, 2021; Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1: Preventing and Combating Sexism; Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 2274(2019): Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment; Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Resolution 459(2020): Fighting sexist violence against women in politics at local and regional level
- The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (the Belém do Pará Convention), 1994
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol), 2003

Economic violence is recognized as the fourth aspect of violence against women and is also included in current definitions of violence against women in politics. This builds on the Istanbul Convention which defines violence against women as all acts of gender-based violence that lead to physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, in public or in private life.²⁷

CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 35²⁸ of the CEDAW Committee and the ILO Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work²⁹ specify economic violence as a fourth type of violence. The Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life also includes economic violence in its definition, recognizing that economic violence is a key inhibitor of women's political participation.³⁰ OSCE commitments also include economic,

27 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), Council of Europe, Istanbul, 11 May 2011, Art. 3. a., <<https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>>.

28 General Recommendation 35, *op. cit.*, note 7, Art. 14. This violence takes multiple forms, including acts or omissions intended or likely to cause or result in death or physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, threats of such acts, harassment, coercion and arbitrary deprivation of liberty.

29 Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, International Labour Organisation (ILO), adopted 21 June 2019, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190>.

30 Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life, Art. 3, Organization of American States, 2017, <[Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life](#)>.

and even political violence, in their definition of violence against women, stating that “violence against women and girls can cause death or physical, sexual, psychological, economic, political and social harm or suffering to girls and women of all ages...”³¹

Academics increasingly include symbolic or semiotic violence, as a broad term, in definitions of violence against women in politics; this describes the use or effect of symbolic acts, sexualized language or images, gendered disinformation, or moral questioning intended to harm women’s representation, voice and agency in politics. Symbolic violence includes acts, which “delegitimize female politicians through gendered tropes denying them competence in the political sphere.”³² There has been some exploration of whether symbolic violence refers to actual acts that intend to discredit or nullify women’s competence for politics or whether the absence of action, rendering women intentionally or unintentionally incompetent, irrelevant, or invisible in politics is also a form of violence.³³ Some argue that symbolic violence against women in politics is diffuse and cannot be measured discretely, by prevalence or by incidence.³⁴ In turn, symbolic violence is important for the definition of violence against women in politics — it can be viewed as a continuum of violence, discrimination and exclusion. It is currently less relevant for legal recourse (i.e., reporting to law enforcement or taking a legal action).

Defining Violence against Women in Politics³⁵

Violence against women in politics is understood as any act, threat, or attempt of gender-based violence, leading to or resulting in physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering directed against a woman in politics (candidate for office or in an elected or appointed position or member of a political party), because she is a woman and is aimed specifically at undermining her rightful representation, voice, and agency in politics. Violence against women in politics is a form of discrimination which seriously inhibits women’s ability to enjoy full rights and freedoms.

Additionally, violence against women in politics can have a symbolic effect, rendering women incompetent, irrelevant or invisible in politics, and deterring other women from seeking to enter politics for fear of becoming a target

31 OSCE. 2018. *Ministerial Council Decision 4/18 on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women*. Preamble.

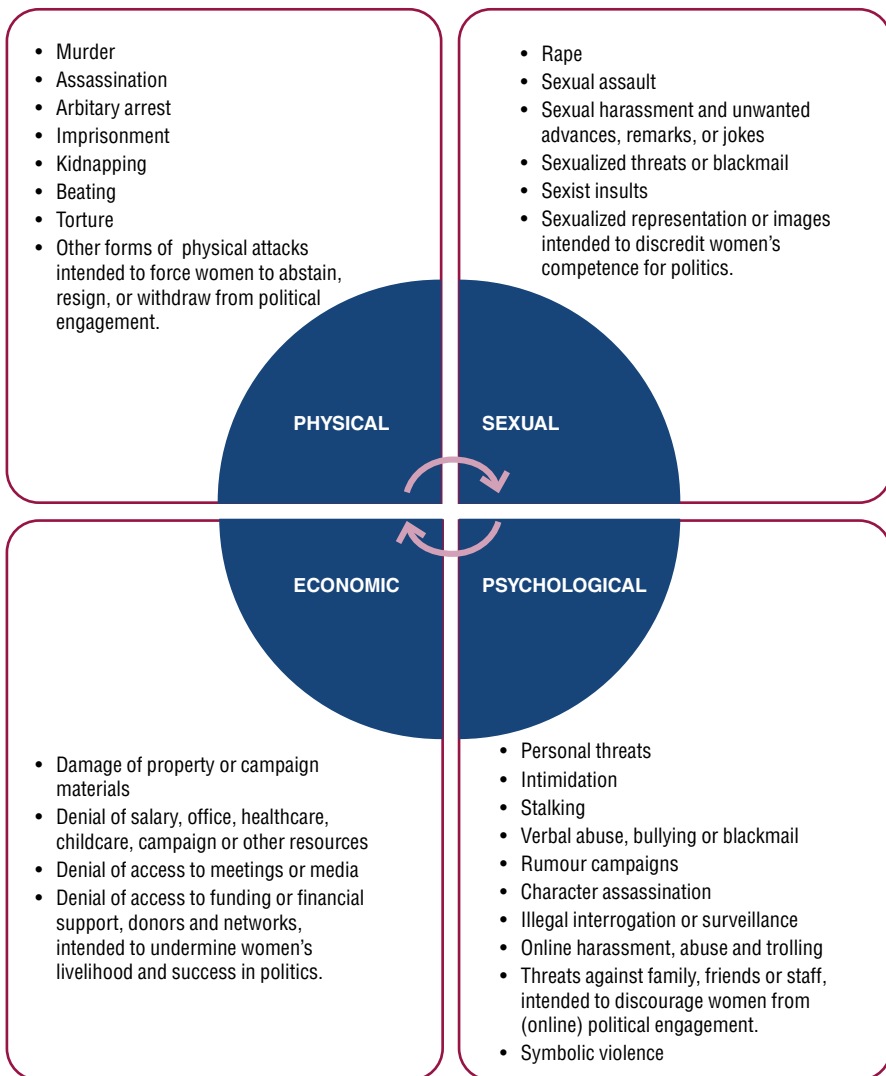
32 Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, “Gender and Political Violence in Latin America: Concepts, debates and solutions”, *Política y gobierno*, vol.23 no.1, Mexico City, June 2016, <https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S1665-20372016000100127&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en>.

33 Gabrielle Bardall, “Symbolic Violence as a Form of Violence against Women in Politics: A Critical Examination”, *Revista mexicana de ciencias políticas y sociales*, vol.65 no.238, Mexico City, April 2020, <https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0185-19182020000100379#B33>.

34 Julie Ballington, *Turning the Tide on Violence against Women in Politics: How Are We Measuring Up?* (Cambridge University Press: 05 November 2018), <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-gender/article/turning-the-tide-on-violence-against-women-in-politics-how-are-we-measuring-up/BDE60029419C30C96ACE14BAB8C49E10>>.

35 This definition was developed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights for the purposes of this Toolkit and does not represent an official OSCE definition. Rather, it is based on existing definitions of violence against women in international legal framework and past OSCE commitments, expanded to political sphere based on programmatic practice.

The following examples show how **Violence against Women in Politics** commonly, but not exclusively, manifests itself.³⁶



³⁶ See for example forms of violence in "Guidance Note: Preventing Violence against Women in Politics", Leadership and Governance Section, UN Women, New York, July 2021, p. 4, <<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Guidance-note-Preventing-violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf>>, and. "Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians: A Growing Crisis", OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Special Representative on Gender Issues, Annual Report 2021, <<https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4247-2021-report-by-the-special-representative-on-gender-issues-violence-against-women-journalists-and-politicians-a-growing-crisis/file>>.

Online violence against women in politics

Online violence against women in politics is alarmingly common. A study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Council of Europe (CoE) from 2018 found that 58.2% of women parliamentarians surveyed had been the target of sexist online attacks on social networks.

The OSCE Ministerial Council, the CEDAW Committee, the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the GREVIO all acknowledge that online violence against women is a growing problem and all of them address it in their decisions and recommendations.

OSCE Ministerial Council Decision No. 4/18 Preventing and Combating Violence against Women

“Recognizing further that abuse, threats, and harassment, including sexual harassment, have become increasingly common, especially through digital technologies, and may silence women’s and girls’ voices in the public sphere.”

CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women

“Gender-based violence against women occurs in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private. These include the family, the community, the public spaces, the workplace, leisure, politics, sport, health services, educational settings and their redefinition through technology-mediated environments, such as contemporary forms of violence occurring in the Internet and digital spaces.”

UN Commission on the Status of Women, 65 Session, Agreed Conclusions

“Mainstream a gender perspective in the conceptualization, development and implementation of digital technologies and related policies and promote the participation of women in order to address violence and discrimination against women and girls in digital contexts, inter alia by encouraging digital technology companies, including Internet service providers, to respect standards and implement transparent and accessible reporting mechanisms”

GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women

“The digital dimension of violence against women encompasses a wide range of acts online or through technology that are part of the continuum of violence that women and girls experience for reasons related to their gender, including in the domestic sphere, in that it is a legitimate and equally harmful manifestation of the gender-based violence experienced by women and girls offline. GREVIO’s understanding of the concept of violence against women in its digital dimension encompasses both online aspects (activities performed and data available on the internet, including internet intermediaries on the surface web as well as the dark web) and technology-facilitated (activities carried out with the use of technology and communication equipment, including hardware and software) harmful behaviour perpetrated against women and girls.”

Are you familiar with doxing, flaming and creepshots? See the [Tool for Women in Politics](#) to learn about various forms of online violence against women and how to ensure safety in online and offline spaces as a woman politician.

THE PREVALENCE AND IMPACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

Without an internationally accepted legal definition, violence against women in politics remains hidden and probably under-reported; its scope and impact are difficult to assess. Some women normalize this violence simply as the “cost of doing politics”, while others choose to remain silent to protect their political careers and/or reputation, or for fear of further victimization, retaliation, and blame for either the abuse or for reporting it. Those wishing to report instances of violence often do not do so, because there are limited effective mechanisms to report and seek recourse.³⁷

Violence against women in politics directly targets women in elected positions or holding political office, as well as women candidates and those aspiring to become politicians, political activists and supporters, their families, communities and staff. Violence against women in politics also indirectly targets other women and new generations of women who aspire to engage in political life, making them hesitant to participate for fear of becoming a target themselves. Women with intersecting identities, such as women with disabilities, younger and minority women, as well as those working on certain human rights and gender-equality topics, are likely at greater risk of suffering this type of violence.³⁸ “The perpetrators, the great majority of whom are men, often commit such acts with the aim of preserving traditional gender roles and restricting or preventing the public participation of women as a group.”³⁹ Studies show that violence against women in politics is widespread and intensifying.⁴⁰ A study by the IPU and Council of Europe found that 85.2% of women parliamentarians surveyed had suffered psychological violence during their time in office, 46.9% had received death threats or threats of rape or beating, 58.2% had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks, and 24.7% had suffered sexual violence.⁴¹ Younger and minority women, and those working on gender equality issues were often singled out. Many of the women surveyed underscored the absence of a mechanism or service through which to complain and seek support.

37 “Violence against Women in Politics”, *op.cit.*, note 12, p. 3.

38 “Violence against Women in Politics a Growing Problem”, Rutgers University website, 5 October 2020, <<https://www.rutgers.edu/news/violence-against-women-politics-growing-problem>>.

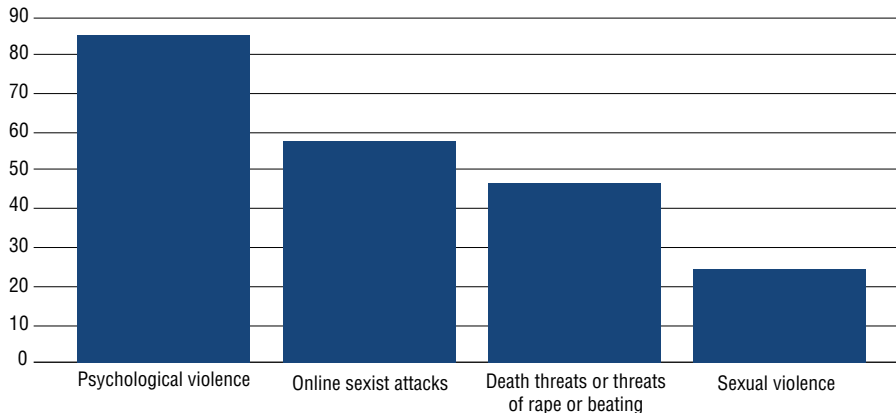
39 “Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians”, *op.cit.*, note 2, p. 5.

40 “An appeal to act: addressing violence against women journalists and politicians”, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s Special Representative on Gender Issues, 2021, <<https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4248-an-appeal-to-act-addressing-violence-against-women-journalists-and-politicians/file>>.

41 “Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe”, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Council of Europe (CoE), 2018, <<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe>>.

Violence against women parliamentarians in Europe⁴²

■ Prevalence of various forms of violence against women parliamentarians in Europe(%)



Source: IPU & CoE, 2018, "Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe"

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) has tracked various forms of political violence targeting women in politics⁴³ and, in December 2021, published new data, covering Africa, Central Asia and the Caucasus, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.⁴⁴ They found that violence of a non-sexual nature is the most common form of violence (66% of cases), followed by mob violence, abduction and forced disappearances (14%), sexual violence (5%) and explosions and other forms of remote violence (1%) based on a review of 11,000 events of political violence against women around the world.⁴⁵ In the Caucasus and Central Asia, Europe and the US, violence of a non-sexual nature is the most common form of violence.⁴⁶ Mob violence is not reported in the US but is reported in the other aforementioned regions. The Caucasus and Central Asia data reports that political violence targeting women in politics also includes abductions and forced disappearances, while in Europe, explosions and other forms of remote violence are reported.⁴⁷

42 Ibid. The study covers responses from 123 women from 45 European countries. The study data was collected between January and June 2018.

43 According to ACLED, these include women candidates for office; politicians; political party supporters; voters; government officials; and activists, human rights defenders (HRDs), and social leaders.

44 Kishi Roudabeh, 2021. "Violence targeting women in politics: Trends in targets, types and perpetrators of political violence", Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) website, 8 December 2021, accessed 31 March 2022, <<https://acleddata.com/2021/12/08/violence-targeting-women-in-politics-trends-in-targets-types-and-perpetrators-of-political-violence/>>.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

Recent studies from the OSCE region suggest that violence against women in politics is both prevalent and systemic. The title of the ODIHR-commissioned study on violence against women on the Polish political scene — It has become so pervasive that I keep forgetting about it — highlights how violence is commonly experienced by all the women surveyed in the study, to the point where women start to normalize it.⁴⁸ While recognizing that determining the exact scale of violence would require additional quantitative research, the study found it already evident that “violence against women is an integral part of the political scene, fuelled by “cultural factors that allow violence against women in politics to persist and be accepted by the majority of the public and the political class.”⁴⁹

The findings of the OSCE Report on Gender-Based Violence against Women Politicians in Serbia also “suggest that the patterns of structural⁵⁰, cultural and various forms of interpersonal violence are highly widespread. Violence is an integral part of (women’s) political careers and is manifested in highly different forms, both in terms of the type of violence and the perpetrators and context in which it unfolded.”⁵¹

In terms of structural violence, the findings show that authoritarian culture and structures are commonplace for political parties and, to a lesser extent for parliaments, fuelling gender segregation in terms of duties, positions, access to networks, and decision-making. These structural inequalities foster the continuation of unequal power relations, providing a breeding ground for violence against women in politics. In terms of type of violence, women in politics were “most exposed to various forms of psychological violence, followed by sexual harassment... , (while) the experiences of physical violence are rare.”⁵² The perpetrators are diverse and include party colleagues and leaders, political opponents, or media, although men are most frequently identified as perpetrators of violence against women in politics.⁵³

Violence against women in politics has a negative impact on women’s health and their ability to do their jobs. An IPU study shows that 57.7 per cent of women parliamentarians that experienced harassment and violence were distraught by the experience, while others felt “humiliated, angered, saddened or disoriented at the time, ... triggering anxiety, health problems or sleep disorders. One third of them had feared for their safety and that of those close to them”, many having had to seek strengthened security and protection.⁵⁴

48 “Violence against women on the Polish political scene”, *op. cit.*, note 20.

49 *Ibid.*

50 Structural violence refers to a form of violence wherein social structures or social institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. See e.g. Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, *Journal of Peace Research*. 6 (3) 1969, pgs. 167–191.

51 “Report on Gender-based Violence against Women Politicians in Serbia”, *op. cit.*, note 20, p. 5.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*

54 “Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe”, *op. cit.*, note 41, p. 10.

In addition to women parliamentarians, women parliamentary staff were also negatively impacted by harassment and violence, with half of those affected reporting feeling isolated and abandoned, with negative effects on their ability to do their jobs normally.⁵⁵ The effect of the violence goes beyond physical and mental health, also impacting women's freedom of expression, their right to security and political participation without discrimination, and their ability to pursue their political agenda. "It may lead women to reconsider expressing their opinions, to be more cautious about the causes they support, to attempt to be less visible," or to leave politics all together.⁵⁶ Still, the women demonstrated resilience, with the majority of women parliamentarians aiming to pursue their parliamentary work.⁵⁷

The magnitude and impact of violence against women in politics may be greater for some women than for others. When addressing the impact of violence against women in politics, one has to recognize that women are not one singular, homogenous group, but rather individuals with intersecting identities, in turn facing intersecting axes of discrimination and violence. Studies on the intersectionality of violence against women show that women in politics experience violence that is not only gendered, but also lies at the intersection of many types of other discrimination, such as those based on ethnicity, disability, etc.⁵⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, highlights that "some women in politics may be more exposed to risks of gender-based violence than others, including: human rights defenders; young, indigenous, lesbian, bisexual and transgender and intersex activists; members of opposition or minority groups; and those voicing minority, dissenting or 'controversial' views."⁵⁹

Looking overall at the prevalence of violence against women in politics, many today refer to it as a "growing crisis". Although there is some supporting data, more is needed.⁶⁰ Generally, "there is an emerging consensus among practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders that efforts to eliminate or prevent violence against women in politics must include adequate measurement and monitoring" of its prevalence and impact.⁶¹

55 *Ibid.*

56 "Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians: A Growing Crisis", *op. cit.*, note 39. p. 22.

57 *Ibid.*

58 Rebecca Kuperberg, "Intersectional Violence against Women in Politics", *Politics and Gender*, 13 November 2018, <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-gender/article/intersectional-violence-against-women-in-politics/857778003CD6AB6448FC30DBC1F34416>>.

59 "Report on violence against women in politics", UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, 6 August 2018, <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1640483?ln=en>>.

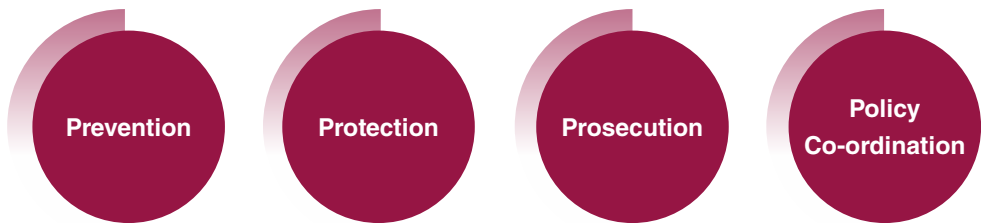
60 "Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians: A Growing Crisis", *op. cit.*, note 2.

61 Ballington, "Turning the Tide on Violence against Women in Politics", *op. cit.*, note 34.

Effective Ways to Address Violence against Women in Politics

Collective efforts are needed to ensure long-term and systemic solutions for addressing the growth in violence against women in politics. Some strategies have surfaced that respond to particular types or examples of violence against women in politics. However, academics, practitioners and women in politics themselves are increasingly calling for joint action, systemic solutions and innovative measures that would respond effectively to the complexity, scope and magnitude of the violence against women in politics.

Building on the existing international legal framework, addressing violence against women in politics requires a holistic response focused on prevention, protection, prosecution, and policy co-ordination, commonly known as the '4Ps' approach.



Prevention

Violence against women is a type of gender-based violence, rooted in systemic gender inequalities and gender-based discrimination and stereotypes in various spheres of our societies, including in politics. While protection and prosecution are required to address imminent and ongoing violence, the prevention of violence is the most efficient policy for reducing and ultimately eliminating all forms of violence against women. This requires solutions that tackle its root causes, address gender-based stereotypes, and change the attitudes and discourse that tolerate violence.⁶²

“Raising awareness is vital to all other efforts, laying any groundwork for de-normalizing violence against women in politics – and, in turn, inspiring action to address it.”⁶³

62 “Preventing and combating violence against women in the OSCE region: Discussion Paper for the 2020 Gender Equality Review Conference”, OSCE, 2020, <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/9/483449.pdf>>.

63 Krok, “Violence against Women in Politics”, *op. cit.*, note 12, p. 217.

Whether individually or collectively, speaking out about experiencing violence in politics or calling out systemic or imminent violence against women in politics and naming the problem contributes to raising awareness of its existence and fostering public discourse around it.

An important part of all strategies to prevent and address violence against women in the long run is to involve men and boys in the discourse about gender equality, stereotypes, and the toxic masculinity which fuels violence. In the short-run, working with men leaders, men politicians, and men allies in promoting zero tolerance for violence against women in politics raises awareness, changes behaviours and attitudes, and helps support those affected by such violence. Public campaigns, personal testimonies, hashtag activism, public debates and campaigning with civil society are all possible strategies for raising awareness of violence against women in politics. Here, the media can play a key role in raising awareness, promoting the violence-free representation of women in politics and de-normalizing violence against women in politics.

Examples of campaigning on preventing violence against women in politics:

Hashtag Activism enables activists to share specific messages and connect with each other on social media, ultimately triggering and contributing to a broader discussion of a topic within society that, ultimately, can lead to change. “Hashtag feminism” has been used as a powerful tool for reducing gender inequalities and sexism, made prominent by the recent #MeToo movement. A number of hashtags have been used to highlight the issue of violence against women in politics, pioneered by the National Democratic Institute’s #NotTheCost.

They argue that this violence cannot be seen simply as the cost of doing politics, but must be addressed. Hashtag activism enables cost-free, global awareness-raising, reduces the stigma around such violence, facilitates sharing of experiences and solutions, and brings together those concerned with or affected by the problem.

Name it. Change it. is a non-partisan project in the United States that aims to end sexist and misogynistic coverage of women candidates by all members of the press — from bloggers to radio hosts to television pundits. It recommends that those who report on women in politics perform a simple ‘Reversibility Test’: “Don’t mention her young children unless you would also mention his, or describe her clothes unless you would describe his, or say she’s shrill or attractive unless the same adjectives would be applied to a man.”

Educating people about violence against women in politics, and building their capacity to understand and address it, is a useful approach for preventing and reducing violence against women in politics. Whether educating or talking to state or non-state actors, a greater awareness of violence against women in politics will also lead to stronger action to address and reduce it. Some of the ways to build capability on violence against women in politics include organizing educational courses, in person or online, delivering training courses, and holding expert meetings.

Collecting adequate data on violence against women is key to understanding and addressing this phenomenon.⁶⁴ Finding ways to measure violence against women in politics, beyond physical and sexual violence, has proved to be a challenge. One way to gather basic data on violence against women in politics could be to use the standard indicators for measuring violence against women — at home and in the community — and then expanding them to indicate cases in politics, the sex of the victim⁶⁵ and the perpetrator, their relationship and type of violence.⁶⁶ Guidelines on data collection on violence against women recommend collecting data on four types of violence: physical, sexual, psychological, and economic, because data from 189 countries demonstrates “that all four categories of violence appear in national legislation on violence against women, albeit with varying degrees of recognition.”⁶⁷

Commissioning research and conducting studies on violence against women in politics, possibly through partnerships between practitioners and academics, and presenting these findings in dedicated informational tools and resources will facilitate learning and action.

Strategies for Preventing Violence against Women in Politics

Awareness-raising	Capacity-building and education	Knowledge management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public campaigns • Personal testimonies • Hashtag activism • Public statements • Campaigning with civil society • Engaging men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational courses • Training events • Expert meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection • Research • Knowledge tools • Resources

Protection

Women experiencing violence in politics face challenges in getting protection and accessing justice. Protection mechanisms are generally insufficient and institutional protection inadequate, either due to the absence of laws and policies that facilitate clear identification of this type of violence, or due to lack of institutional awareness.⁶⁸

64 ODIHR’s election observation reports can be an additional source of information to states on violence against women politicians and candidates in election periods. See more at: <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>>.

65 While this Toolkit refers to victims of violence against women, as commonly referred to within criminal justice systems, international law and the OSCE commitments, it recognizes that some women may identify as victims, while others may prefer the term survivor, highlighting their voice, agency, empowerment, recovery or healing process after experiencing violence. In turn, when referring to victims of violence against women, this Toolkit is also referring to those that identify as survivors.

66 Ballington, “Turning the Tide on Violence against Women in Politics”, *op. cit.*, note 34.

67 Women, Business and the Law 2016. IBRD & World Bank, 2015, p. 20-21, <<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/810421519921949813-0050022015/original/WomenBusinessandtheLaw2016.pdf>>.

68 “Report on Gender-based Violence against Women Politicians in Serbia”, *op. cit.*, note 20, p. 7.

Solutions can be created by pursuing legal reform, strengthening institutional protection and establishing specialist support services for those women at risk and those affected directly or indirectly by this type of violence.

To protect women against violence in politics, legal definitions and acts are needed to define what this type of violence entails and to prescribe referral, protection, and prosecution measures as well as effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions. Some attempts have been made globally to address violence against women in politics in law, either by designing specific, stand-alone laws or by integrating it into the broader legal framework on violence against women.⁶⁹ Currently, no specific laws addressing violence against women in politics exist in the OSCE participating States, while Bolivia was the first country to legislate, with Law No. 243 on Harassment and Political Violence against Women, followed by Ecuador, Peru, Costa Rica and Mexico.⁷⁰ Other efforts to introduce new laws or amend existing laws on violence against women are currently in different stages of development mainly in Latin America, but also in Tunisia.⁷¹ Violence against women in politics could be addressed through reforms to existing penal codes and/or electoral legislation.

Legal reforms are necessary to ensure proper legal definition and recognition of violence against women in politics, in turn also ensuring proper prevention, protection, and prosecution measures. While legal reforms for addressing violence against women in politics may certainly have their limitations — guaranteeing only what is prescribed and often lacking effective implementation — they are a key step that participating States should consider in their attempts to address violence against women in politics.⁷²

Example of a legislative measure: Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life

The Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life, based on the international normative framework, defines spheres and manifestations of this violence, and prescribes responsibilities in terms of prevention, care, punishment and redress to various actors, including judicial authorities, electoral bodies, political parties, and national women's machineries, among others.

69 "Report on violence against women in politics", *op. cit.*, note 59.

70 Restrepo Sanín, "The Law and Violence against Women in Politics. Politics and Gender", *op. cit.*, note 3. See also: Bolivia. Law No. 243 on Harassment and Political Violence against Women, *op. cit.*, note 26.

71 Krook, "Violence against Women in Politics", *op. cit.*, note 12, p. 221 and 222.

72 Ministerial Council Decision 15/05 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, *op. cit.*, note 6.

Institutional protection is key to ensuring that structural violence against women in politics is denounced at institutional level; that acceptable and unacceptable behaviours are determined, complaint mechanisms and response protocols defined, and accountability, in particular sanctions, are stipulated and imposed by an independent body according to clear rules. Parliaments, political parties, and election bodies are key institutions for guaranteeing that women can participate in politics without violence. These institutions should increasingly focus on violence against women in politics, mainly through developing laws and policies, but also by introducing institution-specific codes of conduct, pledges and internal complaint mechanisms.

As symbols of political power, parliaments play a vital role in addressing violence against women in politics and demonstrating that political participation is violence-free and safe for all those involved. A number of parliaments have drawn up policies or codes of conduct to protect women and other groups at risk of violence and/or harassment, as described in more detail in *ODIHR's Tool for Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments*. For example, Canada's *2014 House of Commons Policy on Preventing and Addressing Harassment* includes a definition of sexual harassment, defines more clearly the complaints procedure and resolution process for harassment claims, and is also combined with a Code of Conduct through which new MPs sign an anti-sexual harassment pledge and are obliged to complete sexual harassment prevention training.⁷³ Another Code of Conduct related to gender and violence against women in politics is being developed within the framework of the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This bans election materials that represent women or men in stereotypical, offensive or humiliating ways, with a spectrum of possible sanctions to be imposed by the Central Election Commission.⁷⁴

As the “gatekeepers of democracy” and the main entry points to politics, political parties, together with states, also have a responsibility to ensure that political conduct is free of violence and that women can participate in politics.⁷⁵ Internal party regulations can regulate conduct and help foster a safer political environment within individual political parties. In some countries parties have come together across party lines jointly to make pledges against violence and harassment. In addition to preventive and safety measures that protect women from abuse, intimidation, and bullying within political parties and beyond, political parties also play a key role in protecting women against economic violence in politics. Parties can ensure women's equal access to political and campaign

73 Roosmarijn de Geus, Erin Tolley, Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant and Peter John Loewen, *Women, Power, and Political Representation: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives*, (2021: University of Toronto Press)

74 Krook, “Violence against Women in Politics”, *op. cit.*, note 12, p. 224-225.

75 “Guidelines on Political Party Regulation, second edition”, OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission, 14 December 2020, stating under Principle 2: Duty to Respect, Protect and Facilitate that “The state must ensure that there is adequate protection against violence for candidates and supporters of political parties. While other groups, associations or individuals must have the right to criticize political parties and/or their opinions and demonstrate against them, violence or threats of violence are not permissible.” <[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2020\)032-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2020)032-e)>.

financing, meeting venues or the media and access to party donors and networks, which ultimately determine women's chances for success in politics. ODIHR's [Tool for Addressing Violence against Women in Political Parties](#) gives examples and strategies for political parties.

States carry the main responsibility for providing protection and support to victims of violence. They shall "take the necessary legislative or other measures to protect all victims from any further acts of violence."⁷⁶ As women victims often lack access to protection, OSCE participating States are urged to ensure "full, equal and timely access to justice and effective remedies; medical and social assistance, including emergency assistance; confidential counselling; and shelter; criminalization of gender-based violence and adequate legal protection, as well as timely physical and psychological protection for victims and witnesses."⁷⁷

Additionally, procedures should be introduced by institutions (parliaments, political parties, election management bodies, and others) to ensure that victims/survivors are aware of and have access to complaint mechanisms and safety measures (i.e., safety officers or transport services), assistance (round the clock telephone line, financial assistance, social media management assistance), advice (i.e., an assigned person of confidence or peer/survivor network), and support services (i.e., psychological support or empowerment strategies) that are confidential and put the victims' rights and needs front and centre. Women experiencing this type of violence should be supported in finding adequate protection measures and support services, and in accessing justice. This is what ODIHR's [Tool for Women in Politics](#) aims to do.

Protection strategies addressing violence against women in politics

Legal reform	Institutional protection	Victim protection and support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific Laws • Extending existing penal, civil/labour and/or electoral codes • Model Law available as example 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Codes of conduct (i.e., for parliaments, political parties or within election framework) • Individual or cross-party pledges against violence • Defined complaint mechanisms and response protocols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to justice, including complaint mechanisms • Emergency assistance and safety measures • Coordinated victim assistance, including medical, social, legal, physical, psychological, and other protection and support • Victim support groups • Witness protection programmes

⁷⁶ Istanbul Convention, *op. cit.*, note 27, Art. 18.

⁷⁷ Ministerial Council Decision 15/05 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, *op. cit.*, note 6, Art. 4.

Prosecution

While violence against women in politics seems to be prevalent and increasing, prosecution responses have not kept pace, largely due to the complex and gender-based nature of the phenomenon, the absence of a proper legal definition and measures, and a lack of awareness among the authorities. In turn, violence against women in politics often leaves victims facing challenges in accessing justice, including re-victimization during the reporting and complaint process, resistance from law enforcement officials responsible for investigating and prosecuting perpetrators and inadequate legal protection or access to integrated services.⁷⁸

Investigating and prosecuting violence against women in politics is central to ending impunity and ensuring that women can safely participate in politics. Whether the law is based on new, specific legislation on violence against women or on expanded existing laws, effective, timely and victim-centred investigation, prosecution and judicial proceedings should be established. All reported forms of violence against women in politics should be met with a prompt and appropriate response from the authorities, including an immediate risk assessment, protection measures, and coordinated safety and support.

Protection measures, such as restraining or protection orders, shall also be considered for cases of violence against women in politics, although these may be difficult to apply especially in cases of online violence. Here, coordinated responses may be needed in order to introduce, for example, virtual restraining orders for offenders. Recognizing the stigma, trauma and reputational risks for women reporting such violence, investigations or prosecution of certain forms of violence against women in politics may not need to be dependent exclusively on a victim's complaint and may be initiated on behalf of the victim or continued even if the victim withdraws her statement or complaint.⁷⁹ Considering that the perpetrators of violence against women in politics are often men colleagues from the same party, such measures would help make investigations and prosecutions more effective, reducing the burden on the survivor to pursue justice.⁸⁰ Raising awareness among law enforcement and judicial authorities is central to effective investigation and prosecution.

Ensuring accountability through effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions is also required to prevent violence against women in politics and to set a wider, public, standard of acceptable behaviour. Leaving established offenders without adequate punishment may empower or encourage others to pursue similar types of violence.

78 "Report on violence against women in politics", *op. cit.*, note 59.

79 Istanbul Convention, *op. cit.*, note 27, Art. 44 and Ch. VI.

80 "Not the Cost", NDI, *op. cit.*, note 5.

In addition to legal sanctions, other forms of sanction may also be considered, such as banning offenders from politics, institutions, or social media platforms, or removing their immunities as public officials.

Victim support plays a vital role in ensuring that violence gets reported and that perpetrators are brought to justice. Women who experience any form of violence, including in politics, generally do not report instances of violence, because they are not aware of their rights, nor the services at their disposal, because they fear for their own safety and that of their loved ones, and/or because they worry that they will be further victimized and their private circumstances shared.

For women in politics, these fears and worries are even greater, due to the public nature of their political engagement and their public image. In turn, it is essential to protect the privacy of those affected by violence against women in politics and ensure the confidentiality of the judicial process. This can be done, for example, by using new technologies for remote victim testimonies at court.

Prosecuting violence against women in politics

Prosecution	Sanctions	Victim support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal basis (criminal and civil procedures) • Effective, timely and victim-centred investigation and prosecution • Risk assessment and management • Protection measures • Coordinated safety and support • Educating law enforcement and judicial authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective, proportionate and dissuasive sanctions • Banning perpetrators from politics, institutions, social media • Removing immunities • Compensation for victims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to information, privacy and confidentiality • Access to complaint and referral mechanisms • Free legal aid • Victim protection

Coordinated policies

Addressing a phenomenon as complex and as prevalent as violence against women, including in politics, requires a comprehensive and coordinated response by state and non-state actors. Working across government sectors, including with legislative, political, law enforcement and judicial actors, as well as engaging with media and civil society, in all spheres and at all levels, is essential to finding effective and innovative solutions. To ensure that the rights and needs of the victims are placed at the centre of all efforts and that violence is adequately prevented and prosecuted, coordinated policies and strategies, implemented in a holistic and integrated way, are needed. That said, it is advisable to have

a single coordinating body, to facilitate information exchange, coordinate responsibilities and make sure that efforts are complementary. Stakeholders should allocate adequate financial and human resources to ensure an adequate joint response.

Civil society organizations can raise awareness of violence against women in politics and they are usually the main providers of victim-centred support to women who experience violence. They advocate for legal reforms, call for action and provide emergency support and shelter. Indeed, women's organizations may be particularly well-positioned to take action, given their emphasis and comparative expertise on issues like violence against women and women's political participation. Their efforts should be recognized and supported, and systemic cooperation established. ODIHR's [Tool on the Role of Civil Society and Women's Movements in addressing Violence Against Women in Politics](#) provides examples of overarching strategies that may be employed by civil society actors.

Partnerships with non-traditional actors are key to addressing violence against women in politics in all its forms and manifestations effectively, particularly as related to economic and psychological violence, including online violence. Partnerships should be explored with the media, academic institutions, or internet and social media providers to find innovative solutions in the areas of awareness-raising, data collection, and protection. The media can play a crucial role in ensuring the violence-free representation of women in politics, ensuring coverage without the gender-based stereotypes that discredit women's competence for politics. Social media providers are important both for online advocacy as well as for tackling the complex subject of online violence.

Coordinated Policies for Addressing Violence against Women in Politics

Coordinated Response	Engaging with civil society	Partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated policies across sectors and institutions (i.e., data collection) • Holistic and integrated approach • Victim-centred joint efforts • Coordinating body • Financial and human resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint advocacy • Integrated victim support services (i.e., one-stop shop for victim support) • Systemic coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media • Internet and social media providers • Academia • Men and boys

Preventing violence against women in politics – everyone has a role to play

Responsibility for addressing violence against women in politics lies mainly with states and their various institutions, but it starts with us. Violence against women in politics is a violation of human rights, a barrier to women's political participation and a challenge to democracy. In allowing this problem to continue, we are excluding women — half the population — from decision-making that affects us all. Individually and collectively, we all must play our part in addressing violence against women in politics and ensuring a violence-free political arena for women and men. This, in turn, will improve our laws and policies, our families and societies, our democracies, and our peace and security in the OSCE region.

Collaboration, partnerships, and coordinated policies can deliver effective solutions for addressing violence against women in politics. Legislators, the judiciary, prosecutors, law enforcement, decision-makers and politicians, women and men, civil society, academia, international organizations and others need to join forces and work across sectors on finding joint solutions, laws, and policies to prevent violence against women in politics effectively, to protect those affected by it, and end impunity. Working across sectors, countries, parties, political lines, any lines, will enable us to focus not on our names or logos, but on ensuring that women and men, boys and girls can live a life free of violence, allowing them to take part in various spheres of life, including in politics, and achieve their full potential, to the benefit of us all.

Further Reading and References

Ballington, Julie. 2018. Turning the Tide on Violence against Women in Politics: How Are We Measuring Up? <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-gender/article/turning-the-tide-on-violence-against-women-in-politics-how-are-we-measuring-up/BDE60029419C30C96ACE-14BAB8C49E10>>.

Bolivia. 2012. Law No. 243 on Harassment and Political Violence against Women. <https://www.comunicacion.gob.bo/sites/default/files/docs/Ley%20N%C2%BA243%20Contra%20el%20Acoso%20y%20Violencia%20Politica%20hacia%20las%20Mujeres.pdf>

Bardall, Gabrielle, Bjarnegård, Elin and Piscopo, Jennifer. 2019. How is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts in *Political Studies*. Volume: 68 issue: 4, page(s): 916-935 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719881>>.

Council of Europe. 2011. Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). <<https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>>.

Institute of Public Affairs, Poland. 2021. „... It has become so pervasive that I keep forgetting about it”. Violence against women on the Polish political scene. <<https://www.isp.org.pl/en/publications/it-has-become-so-pervasive-that-i-keep-forgetting-about-it>>.

[violence-against-women-on-the-polish-political-scene](#)>.

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Council of Europe (CoE). 2018. Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe. Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe <<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe>>.

International Labour Organisation. 2019. Convention Concerning the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work. <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORML-EXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_IL0_CODE:C190>.

Kishi Roudabeh, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). 2021. Violence targeting women in politics: Trends in targets, types and perpetrators of political violence. Accessed 31 March 2022. <<https://acleddata.com/2021/12/08/violence-targeting-women-in-politics-trends-in-targets-types-and-perpetrators-of-political-violence/>>.

Krook, Mona Lena and Restrepo Sanin, Juliana. 2016. Gender and Political Violence in Latin America: Concepts, debates and solutions. <https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S1665-20372016000100127&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en>.

Krook, Mona Lena. 2020. Violence against Women in Politics.

Kuperberg, Rebecca. 2018. Intersectional Violence against Women in Politics. <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-gender/article/intersectional-violence-against-women-in-politics/857778003CD6AB6448FC30DBC1F34416>>.

National Democratic Institute (NDI). 2016. #NotTheCost: Stopping Violence against Women in Politics: Program Guidance. “<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/not-the-cost-program-guidance-final.pdf>” #NotTheCost: Stopping Violence against Women in Politics: Program Guidance

National Democratic Institute (NDI). 2018. Not the Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics, A Renewed Call to Action. “<https://www.ndi.org/publications/notthecost-stopping-violence-against-women-politics-renewed-call-action>” Not the Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics. A Renewed Call to Action

National Democratic Institute. 2018. No Party to Violence: Analyzing Violence against Women in Political Parties. <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORML-EXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_IL0_CODE:C190>.

Organization of American States. 2017. Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life. <<https://www.oas.org/en/mesecvi/docs/LeyModeloViolenciaPolitica-EN.pdf>>.

OSCE. 2005. Ministerial Council Decision 15/05 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women. <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/8/17451.pdf>>.

OSCE. 2014. Ministerial Council Decision 14/04: OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality. <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/d/23295.pdf>>."

OSCE. 2018. Ministerial Council Decision 4/18 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women. <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/e/406019.pdf>>.

OSCE. 2020. Preventing and combating violence against women in the OSCE region: Discussion Paper for the 2020 Gender Equality Review Conference. <<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/9/483449.pdf>>.

OSCE. 2021. Report on Gender-based Violence against Women Politicians in Serbia. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/2/500611_0.pdf>.

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Special Representative on Gender Issues. 2021. Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians: A Growing Crisis. <<https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4247-2021-report-by-the-special-representative-on-gender-issues-violence-against-women-journalists-and-politicians-a-growing-crisis/file>>.

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. 2018. Safety of Female Journalists Online: A #SOFJO Resource Guide. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/9/468861_0.pdf>.

UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. 2018. Report on violence against women in politics. <<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1640483?ln=en>>.

UN Women. 2021. Guidance Note: Preventing Violence against Women in Politics. <<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Guidance-note-Preventing-violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf>>.

