

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

Tool 4

# The Role of Civil Society and WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS



**Addressing Violence Against Women in  
Politics in the OSCE Region Toolkit**  
Tool 4: The Role of Civil Society and  
Women's Movements



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*Addressing Violence Against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region*  
*Tool 4: The Role of Civil Society and Women’s Movements*

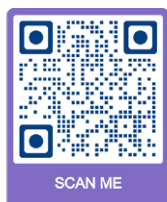
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# Toolkit for Addressing Violence against Women in Politics

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

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

This Toolkit for Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region aims to raise awareness and strengthen knowledge and capacities of OSCE participating States towards effective measures for addressing and responding to this type of violence. It offers 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.

# Introduction

Violence against women in politics is increasingly recognized around the world as a barrier to women's political participation.<sup>1</sup> However, it is not simply a gendered version of existing definitions of political violence, focusing on physical attacks directed at political rivals. Rather, it is a distinct phenomenon, employing a wide range of tactics to exclude women *as women* from political and public life.<sup>2</sup>

Calls to address violence against women in politics are on the rise around the world. In 2021, the topic was identified as a priority theme for the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women 65<sup>th</sup> Session.<sup>3</sup> In a global call to action launched on the fifth anniversary of the #NotTheCost campaign, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) highlighted the need for actors at all levels — including international organizations, governments, parliaments, political parties, traditional media outlets, and social media platforms — to take steps to tackle violence against women in politics.<sup>4</sup>

This tool explores the role that civil society and women's movements can play in combating violence against women in politics.<sup>5</sup> 'Civil society' is defined broadly here to include citizen-led organizations; networks and coalitions operating outside the formal arena of politics, but possibly incorporating some politicians and state officials; and international non-governmental organizations.

While civil society actors lack the power to sanction offenders directly, they can raise awareness about violence against women in politics, ultimately driving positive change through triggering and supporting public discourse and improvements in the legislative framework as well as a change in social mores and values, and support the women who experience violence.

1 Mona Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "Gender and Political Violence in Latin America: Concepts, debates and solutions", *Política y gobierno*, vol.23 no.1 Ciudad de México ene./jun. 2016. <[https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S1665-20372016000100127&script=sci\\_arttext&tlng=en](https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S1665-20372016000100127&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en)>.

2 Mona Lena Krook, *Violence against Women in Politics*, (USA, Oxford University Press 2020).

3 See more at: <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw65-2021>> (Accessed on 15 July 2022).

4 "Political Participation and Violence against Women in Politics in Southeastern Europe", National Democratic Institute, Sarajevo, February 2021 <<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Preliminary%20Report%20-%20Violence%20Against%20Women%20in%20Politics%20in%20Southeastern%20Europe.pdf>>.

5 This toolkit limits the definition of 'women in politics' to those serving in formal political roles, like candidates, members of political parties as well as elected and appointed officials. However, it is important to recognize that women activists may also face various forms of violence in connection with their political activities.

Indeed, women's organizations may be particularly well-positioned to take action, given their prior emphasis and comparative expertise on issues like violence against women and women's political participation.

The sections below identify four overarching strategies that might be employed by civil society actors: raising awareness, collecting data, creating a safer environment, and mobilizing for policy reform. Each category is further broken down into specific initiatives, drawing mainly on examples from the OSCE region. Where relevant, however, cases from other areas of the world are also included to illustrate further ways that civil society might contribute to tackling violence against women in politics.



# Emerging Promising Practices

## RAISING AWARENESS

Awareness-raising plays an important role in all efforts to combat violence against women in politics, as it lays the groundwork for recognizing the problem and inspiring action to address it. In many countries in the OSCE region and beyond, violence against women in politics is not well-understood or recognized as a 'problem' worth addressing.<sup>6</sup> In recent years, however, civil society actors across the OSCE region have employed a variety of approaches to talk about this problem and give voice to women's experiences.



### Open letters and manifestos

- Publishing open letters and manifestos is one tactic for speaking out against violence against women in politics. In **Italy**, for example, members of the Parliamentary Intergroup on Women, Rights, and Equal Opportunities published a statement in a major newspaper in 2016 condemning “vulgar insults” and “sexist vignettes” targeting women at all levels of Italian politics. They argued that such acts “feed and give legitimacy to the debasement and discrimination of women in society, in the world of work, in institutions, in political life, and in the media.”<sup>7</sup>

6 “Violence against Women in Political Parties in North Macedonia: Assessment Report”, National Democratic Institute, Skopje, September 2020, <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/WIn with Women VAW-PP Assessment Report ENG.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/WIn%20with%20Women%20VAW-PP%20Assessment%20Report%20ENG.pdf)>.

7 “Enough with the insults to women in politics”, la Repubblica, 18 March 2016, <[https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/03/18/news/\\_basta\\_con\\_gli\\_insulti\\_per\\_le\\_donne\\_in\\_politica\\_-135798110/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/03/18/news/_basta_con_gli_insulti_per_le_donne_in_politica_-135798110/)>.



- In **France**, this strategy has been widely used to draw attention to sexual violence and harassment. In 2016, more than 500 men and women activists and elected officials joined forces to call for an end to impunity for sexual harassment in politics (see also below under hashtag activism).<sup>8</sup> Several days later, 17 women former government ministers from parties across the ideological spectrum published a joint call denouncing sexist remarks and behaviours in French politics.<sup>9</sup> Later that year, women staff at the French parliament launched their own awareness-raising collective, *Chair Collaboratrice*, with a website and Twitter account, posting anonymous accounts of violence experienced by women staff members.<sup>10</sup>

## Hashtag activism

With the rising popularity of social media platforms, hashtags have become a new tool for activists, enabling them to spread their message while also helping them to connect with one another. Using social media hashtags, therefore, is another way to raise awareness and express solidarity with targets of violence. These can also trigger and contribute to a broader discussion of a topic within society as a whole, which, ultimately, can lead to change. In 2016, the **National Democratic Institute** launched the #NotTheCost hashtag as part of its Global Call to Action to stop violence against women in politics. The hashtag seeks to reject arguments that violence is simply the 'cost of doing politics' for women.

- A French hashtag #levonslomerta — meaning “end the silence”<sup>11</sup>— was used in 2016 by women activists and politicians in French politics to encourage holding men accountable for their sexually aggressive behaviour.<sup>12</sup> A petition was signed by more than 16,000 supporters, demanding that leaders of political parties, Presidents of the National Assembly, the Senate and other political institutions in **France** take action to end violence against women in their political organizations or institutions. Concrete measures were demanded in the petition, such as excluding perpetrators from politics, prioritizing the fight against sexual violence in party procedures or statutes, and providing a support unit to guide victims in their reporting, particularly in terms of legal proceedings.<sup>13</sup>

8 “Harassment and politics: “To put an end to impunity”, *Libération*, 9 May 2016, <[https://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/05/09/harcelement-et-politique-pour-que-l-impunite-cesse\\_1451542/](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/05/09/harcelement-et-politique-pour-que-l-impunite-cesse_1451542/)>.

9 “Sexual harassment: ‘Impunity is over’”, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 21 June 2017, <<https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/Harcelement-sexuel-L-impunite-c-est-fini-785595>>.

10 Chair Collaboratrice, Twitter account, <<https://twitter.com/chaircollab?lang=en>>.

11 Omertà is (among the Mafia) a code of silence about criminal activity and a refusal to give evidence to the police: ‘loyal to the oath of omertà’, <<https://www.lexico.com/definition/omerta>>.

12 “Sexual harassment: French political ‘impunity’ attacked”, BBC News website, 10 May 2016. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36258033>>.

13 “Violences sexuelles en politique : #levonslomerta !”, Change.org, 2016, <<https://www.change.org/p/violences-sexuelles-en-politique-levons-l-omerta?fbclid=IwAR2rbsh5nJrZ6rbLwo9QycG6RZ9Pmpo7kvHq4RrUNITij37Tu591P6XNu0>>.

In the OSCE region, civil society organizations have also created a variety of hashtags on this issue. In March 2018, staffers at the **European Parliament** created the #MeTooEP hashtag as a way of calling out the problem of sexual harassment in the institution.

- The #LiftHerUp hashtag was used in many different contexts, including in **Canada**, where the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters launched the #LiftHerUp campaign "to counter the misogynist rallying cry that has been heard abroad and even on the steps of Alberta's Legislature Building. Candidates running for municipal office in the 2021 elections across Alberta were invited to sign ... "(a) Lift Her Up Commitment." By signing the pledge, candidates commit inter alia to respect women during campaigning and, if elected to office, to treat all candidates with respect, to prevent sexist and violent behaviours, and to pursue policies to stop all forms of violence.
- In 2020, NYTKIS, a coalition of women's organizations in **Finland**, launched the #ElectionsWithoutHate campaign to call attention to hate speech and harassment directed at women — and especially racialized women — in Finnish elections. Surveys conducted by NYTKIS revealed that women involved in local politics experienced significantly more hate speech than their male colleagues and that much of this hate speech was specifically related to their gender. The campaign encouraged supporters to use the hashtag, to participate in anti-hate conversations, and support candidates facing hate speech.<sup>14</sup>

## Women's networks

- Women have long used formal and informal networks as a means to navigate the world of politics, connecting with one another to amplify their power and impact, to share promising practices, and create communities of support. In **Ukraine**, in 2014, women formed the Respect campaign against sexism in the media and politics to push for greater gender equality in politics and public life. Hosting the *Povaha* (Respect) website<sup>15</sup>, combining online content, advocacy campaigns, and offline events, Respect seeks to create a more level playing field for women politicians, while also raising the profile of women experts and opinion-makers. They explicitly connect sexism with political inequality, stating, "The harm done by comments and

14 "Women's organizations campaign against hate speech and harassment", NYTKIS website, 18 August 2020, <<https://www.stinfo.fi/tiedote/naisjarjestot-kampanjoivat-vihapuhetta-ja-hairintaa-vastaan?publisherId=69817644&releaseld=69886428>>.

15 <<https://povaha.org.ua/>>.

remarks aimed at denigrating politicians because of their gender translates into lost trust of voters and, as a result, half of the country doesn't have fair representation in government and public offices."<sup>16</sup>

- More informally, female politicians in **North Macedonia**, interviewed about the violence they faced in connection with their political work, described the importance of the solidarity and support offered by other female officeholders, including those in other political parties. During a focus group, one woman explained, "It was the encouragement from my female colleagues that motivated me out of silence and passivity." Another shared: "It meant a lot to me, the silent and private messages of support I received. Seeing that these things happen also to other women from political parties made me stubborn and determined to be vocal."<sup>17</sup>



16 Tanya Lokot, "Women and Digital Advocacy in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine", Global Voices Exchange, 27 January 2016, <<https://rising.globalvoices.org/exchange/2016/01/27/women-and-digital-advocacy-in-post-euromaidan-ukraine/>>.

17 NDI, "Violence against Women in Political Parties in North Macedonia", *op. cit.*, note 6.

## Partnerships with men

- Male allies can also play an important role in raising awareness of violence against women in politics, using their positions of power and privilege to draw greater attention to the issue. In early 2021, the Women's Political Network (WPN) in **Montenegro** organized a conference on violence against women in politics with the Parliament of Montenegro and United Nations Development Programme. The event featured research by WPN showing that nine out of 10 women politicians in Montenegro had experienced gender discrimination and seven out of 10 had faced some form of violence in connection with their political work.<sup>18</sup>

The conference opened with introductory remarks from the male President of the Parliament of Montenegro, Aleksa Bečić, who condemned the frequent “sexist, misogynistic, and overall discriminatory comments or photo and video creations... related to the women in politics.”<sup>19</sup>

- In 2021, several prominent politicians in **North Macedonia** expressed support for the “Circle NO to Violence against Women in Politics” campaign. The female Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Jagoda Shahpaska, noted on Facebook that violence against women in political parties often increased during election campaigns and she called on citizens to oppose violence against women in politics, “no matter which woman we propose, no matter which woman we vote for.”<sup>20</sup> Her message was echoed by the male mayor of Centar, Saša Bogdanović, who also called on citizens to join the campaign and end the violence against women in politics, which he asserted was a factor shaping women's low levels of representation in the country.<sup>21</sup>

## Public education

- A final strategy is to develop campaigns to educate the public on this issue. In 2016, the Women's Media Center raised money via Kickstarter to make a short video raising awareness of violence against women in politics in the **United States**.

18 Daniela Gasparikova, “Violence against women politicians: an unacceptable cost of gender equality”, UNDP Europe and Central Asia, 29 June 2021, <<https://www.eurasia.undp.org/content/rbec/en/home/blog/2021/violence-against-women-politicians-montenegro-parliament.html>>.

19 “Conference on violence against women in politics”, Parliament of Montenegro website, 5 March 2021, <<https://www.skupstina.me/en/articles/conference-on-violence-against-women-in-politics-2>>.

20 “Shahpaska: To surround “NO” to violence against women in politics”, Daily News website, 30 August 2021, <<https://www.txtreport.com/news/2021-08-30-shahpaska--to-surround-%22no%22-to-violence-against-women-in-politics.ByGwfd9WK.html>>.

21 “Bogdanovic against violence against women in politics”, Slobodenpecat website, accessed 6 October 2022, <<https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/bogdanovikj-protiv-nasilstvoto-vrz-zhenite-vo-politikata/>>.

Posted online in 2017, the video featured the experiences of eight women, Democrats and Republicans, who had run for political office across the country, from high school students to gubernatorial candidates to members of the U.S. Congress.<sup>22</sup> As of 2019, the public service announcement had been viewed more than 30,000 times.



## COLLECTING DATA

Data collection has long been important to women's movements around the world. This is because activists are keenly aware that concrete data is often essential to prove the existence of a problem, as well as for measuring progress and setbacks over time. To overcome the lack of knowledge on violence against women in politics, civil society organizations across the OSCE have used a variety of techniques to gather and disseminate information on this problem across the region.

### Alternative reporting

- One of the most immediate ways to gather knowledge on violence against women in politics is to set up alternative reporting mechanisms. As the #MeToo movement got underway in the **United Kingdom** in 2017, women in the Labour Party decided to create a website called #LabourToo to collect accounts from women that could later be developed into a short report for party leaders (see a detailed case study on this

22 "Women in politics discuss online harassment", Women's Media Center, 7 November 2017, <<https://womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/nameitchangeit>>.

in the **Political Parties tool**). Launched in October 2017, the website offered women an opportunity to “anonymously share your experiences of domestic or sexual abuse, harassment, or discrimination in the Labour Party.” The organizers acknowledged that speaking out was difficult, but explained that the goal was to “build a compendium of the types of abuse women face which all too often are unseen, ignored, or swept under the carpet.”

The resulting report, sent to party leaders in February 2018, identified six recurring themes in women's testimonies: problematic individuals were “common knowledge” but no actions were ever taken against them; there was little or no confidence in the party's formal complaint or disciplinary processes; women felt there was little support for pursuing complaints, and sometimes they were actively dissuaded from doing so; members lacked guidance and safeguards; men often had a poor understanding as to what constituted sexual harassment; and women were routinely abused by senior people in positions of trust.

### Crowd-sourced mapping

- Another user-oriented approach is to use crowd-sourcing to collect data on violence against women in politics, opening up data reporting to a large and evolving group of participants on the internet. In **Moldova** in 2015, a network of 32 NGOs and activists created the Platform for Gender Equality to serve as a unified voice for the promotion of gender equality.



Ahead of the 2020 presidential election, they set up Gender Monitor,<sup>23</sup> an online space for mapping instances of sexism in the public sphere and violence against women in the election campaign. The Platform encourages all citizens, including witnesses and victims, to report these incidents using an online *ushahidi* tool which collects, stores, and geographically illustrates these occurrences on a continually updated map.

To add information, individuals must sign in using authentication to ensure that the report is from a real person. This report is then checked by a human verification filter, namely a person who ensures that it does not contain personal data or incite hatred and discrimination. Because the goal is to make the data available to the general public, authentication is not needed to view the map itself. To encourage members of the public to put forward formal complaints related to these incidents, authentication is also not needed to download forms for notifying the authorities.

## Original surveys

- A growing number of civil society organizations across the OSCE region have also begun to carry out original surveys of women in politics, both to establish the prevalence of violence against them and to better understand its impact on women and their political work. A study conducted by La Strada Ukraine, for example, surveyed 100 women politicians and activists in 2018. It found that, in **Ukraine**, common manifestations of violence against women in politics included campaigns to humiliate women on social networks and in the mass media (mentioned by 62% of respondents), psychological violence (59%), sexist phrases (59%), verbal abuse (58%), and sexual harassment (47%). Only one-quarter (23.5%) of respondents, in contrast, said their party had an internal policy for preventing violence and discrimination against women in politics.<sup>24</sup>
- In 2019, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy funded a study on violence against women in politics in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**. The research entailed a 52-question survey of 83 women in politics of different ages and ethnicities from 37 towns and cities, followed by in-depth interviews of 18 women. More than half (60.2%) of the survey respondents said they had personally experienced some form of violence in the course of their political engagement. Nearly all respondents (96.4%) stated that the most common type was verbal and emotional abuse, whereas only 10.8% said it often took the form of physical and sexual violence.

23 <<https://gender.monitor.md/>>.

24 La Strada – Ukraine 2018, 10, 18. Violence against Women in Politics Case Study: Ukraine. <<https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/ukraine-case-study.pdf>>.

When asked about those who committed acts of violence against women in politics, 74.7% said social network users were frequent perpetrators, followed by members of opposing parties (66.3%) and members of their own parties (47%). Interviewees explained that colleagues would sometimes use intimidation to ensure that women toed the party line. Others described situations where elected officials of other parties would use economic pressures, like denying a woman the salary for her local council position, in attempts to get her to do their bidding. While most respondents said the violence did not scare or discourage them, some did take steps to minimize their public presence. This included expressing their views in public less often, deleting their social media profiles, and even quitting politics. Some women also mentioned they had developed serious health problems due to the daily stress.<sup>25</sup>

- NDI commissioned similar research on **North Macedonia** in 2020. Distinct from the studies outlined above, however, this work incorporated both men and women as research subjects. Ten men and ten women were recruited from each of ten political parties, for a total of 200 respondents, to answer a 27-question survey (in the case of the men) and a 40-question survey (in the case of the women).

Twenty in-depth interviews were also held with male and female leaders from these ten parties, followed by ten women-only, single-party focus groups with 89 participants in total. These methods yielded a wide range of examples of violence against women in politics, including intimate or personal details and images shared on social media, defamation and impersonation online, physical confrontation, harassment of family members, bullying in political spaces, and insults framing women's political participation as immoral. The research showed that, according to respondents, the most common perpetrators were members of a woman's own party (54%), elected authorities from her own party (22%), leaders of her own party (8%), and members of her own family (16%). Most (57%) of the women in the study said they had first experienced violence while being active in local politics, but very few said they had reported any of these acts to the authorities. The impact of this violence on these women had many dimensions, including negative effects on their health and family relationships, fear for their own lives and the lives of family members, and self-censorship, limiting freedom of expression.<sup>26</sup>

- In **Kyrgyzstan**, the Social Technologies Agency NGO conducted a study on violence against women in politics in the Kyrgyz Republic. The study, commissioned by the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek using the methodology supported by ODIHR, found that women candidates and MPs of national and local councils experienced various forms of violence in politics: ninety-seven per cent of women survey

25 Miftari 2019, 4, 31, 28. Violence against Women in Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina. <<https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/wfd-study-violence-against-women-in-politics-in-bih-final.pdf>>.

26 NDI Violence against Women in Political Parties in North Macedonia", op. cit., note 6, 21, 27. Violence against Women in Political Parties in North Macedonia: Assessment Report. <<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Win with Women VAW-PP Assessment Report ENG.pdf>>.



respondents are aware of cases of sexual harassment of women politicians, thirty-two per cent have experienced personal threats and/or threats towards their family and friends, fifteen per cent respondents had received offensive and sexist remarks, and two per cent had experienced physical violence. Women reported that on the one hand, violence strengthened their motivation to continue working as an MP and on the other, led them to decide to end their political careers, caused stress and fear for their own and their family's safety, and led to isolation. Women also reported that violence affected their ability to perform their duties and express their political views.

## Public discourse and language

- Other civil society organizations have focused on the broader political environment and the degree to which it reflects and promotes violence against women in politics. In **Moldova**, the Platform for Gender Equality monitored sexist discourse for two months in the run-up to parliamentary elections in 2021. The project was run by the Promo-LEX Association, the Women's Association for Contemporary Society, AFINA, RCTV Memoria, and Gender-Center, with support from UN Women and Sweden.

The resulting report analysed, among other topics, the gendered language in politics used by candidates and the media; gendered aspects in the communications and speeches of male and female candidates; gender mainstreaming in electoral debates by candidates and the media; and posts on gender issues on the social media accounts of political parties. The study found that some forms of sexist discourse were very common, such as offensive labels given to women by opposing candidates; the use of male-centered language when talking about political actors; and sexist jokes and vulgarities directed at female candidates. The analysis also detected physical and emotional aggression between candidates on political debate shows.<sup>27</sup>

## Online behaviour and disinformation

- Further projects examine online harassment and abuse, mapping what this form of violence against women in politics looks like, as well as exploring what online behaviours mean for democracy and gender equality. A study of **Ukraine** conducted by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems monitored the abuse of 183 political men and women between 2014 and 2018 and found that, while physical threats were relatively rare, social media posts often involved psychological and sexualized abuse directed at female politicians.

27 "Report - Sexist speech in the public space during the early 2021 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova as a form of violence against women in elections (VIFA)", Platform for Gender Equality, 15 October 2021, <<https://egalitadedegen.md/raport-discursul-sexist-spatiu-public-si-perioada-alegerilor-parlamentare-anticipate-din-2021-republica-moldova-ca-forma-violentei-impotriva-femeilor-alegeri-vifa/>>.



Common forms of psychological abuse included allegations of moral misconduct, low intelligence and competence, profanity and xenophobia, and attacks on close family and friends. Sexualized violence typically referenced rape or sexual harassment, or accused women of being prostitutes. In comparison, men in the sample were often attacked for their policy positions, rather than their personal identities. In both cases, violence became more frequent and visible during election cycles and other historic events, like political protests.<sup>28</sup>

- Looking more specifically at the problem of gendered disinformation, in 2020 Demos conducted a study of state-aligned disinformation campaigns in **Poland** using data from Twitter. The researchers observed that these accounts did not merely seek to spread false information, but also to use 'highly emotive and value-laden content' to undermine their targets. This content played on existing tropes to try to convince readers that women in public life were one or more of the following: devious, stupid, overly sexual, in need of protection, or immoral, and as such, unfit for public office. These efforts to 'weaponize' gender, the researchers concluded, reflect deliberate attempts to exclude women from politics.<sup>29</sup>

28 Otito Greg-Obi, Iryna Lylyk, Gennadiy Korzhov, and Olena Buchunsk, "Online Violence against Women in Politics in Ukraine: An IFES Assessment 2019", November 2019, <<https://www.readkong.com/page/online-violence-against-women-in-politics-in-ukraine-an-7341049>>.

29 Judson et al, "Engendering Hate: The Contours of State-Aligned Gender Disinformation Online", Demos, October 2020, <<https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf>>.

## Mixed approaches

- A final example of data collection was supported by the ODIHR and carried out by researchers at the Institute of Public Affairs. Focusing on the case of **Poland**, this work combined multiple methods in the same investigation. In one part of the study, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 12 women deputies and local officeholders, focusing on how these women defined 'violence against women in politics.' Their answers were very similar to those given by political women in other countries: hate speech online, including gender-based humiliation, offensive comments about their appearance, and threats of physical assault and rape; verbal violence during plenary sessions and committee meetings; physical aggression during demonstrations, rallies, and other political activities; vandalism of offices and personal property; and derision and belittling of women to reinforce gender inequality.

The other part of the project entailed analyzing social media posts during the last two weeks of the 2019 Polish parliamentary election campaign. Selecting 25 Twitter profiles, the researchers focused on the accounts of women candidates, political parties, and traditional media outlets. This analysis uncovered threats of physical violence, the use of women's private lives to discredit their reputations, sexist insults and gendered slurs, references to women's sex lives, questioning of their femininity, and declarations about women's emotionality — all questioning women's rights to participate in politics at all.<sup>30</sup>

## CREATING A SAFER ENVIRONMENT

A third set of civil society interventions focuses on making politics a more secure space for women. These range from individual-level strategies to handle and prevent abuse (see also the **Women in Politics tool** for guidance) to more collective mechanisms to show solidarity and equip women with the skills better to ensure their safety. These tactics are less well-developed across the OSCE participating States, but examples from other parts of the world suggest they might easily be translated into these national contexts as well.

### Counter-speech and solidarity

- In the **United Kingdom**, the issue of violence against women in politics has been widely discussed since 2016, following the assassination of Jo Cox, a female Member of Parliament. In a memoir published in 2017, Cox's colleague, Jess Phillips, called on allies of women "in the firing line" to "form a misogyny counter-speech army".

30 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>>.

She explained that whenever she was about to go on television, or to do things that might attract online hate, like making a speech on women's rights, she would put out a request for positive words and images to flood her Twitter feed to help drown out the vitriol.<sup>31</sup> When she faced a large wave of death and rape threats soon after being elected in 2015, her colleagues in parliament also used the hashtag #IStandWithJessPhillips to express their support.

- An automated version of this strategy is ParityBot, developed in 2019 by Parity YEG, an NGO in **Canada**, in partnership with a computer programmer. Using machine learning methods, ParityBot detects abusive and problematic tweets directed at women during an election and then sends out a positive tweet for every bad tweet, with the aim of generating more positive political discourse for women during elections. To date, this tool has been employed during elections in **Canada**, the **United States**, and **New Zealand**.<sup>32</sup>

## Safety training

Another way to foster women's safety in political spaces is to help them evaluate potential vulnerabilities and identify how to overcome these challenges (see the **Women in Politics tool** for tips and guidance).

- Glitch, a charity based in the **United Kingdom**, was founded in 2017 by Seyi Akiwowo after she faced high levels of sexist and racist online abuse while serving as a local councillor. Thanks to a partnership with the Equal Power Coalition, Glitch offered free online training to women who were, or who were seeking to become, politically active.<sup>33</sup> To equip women with practical tools and increased control over their online presence, the one-hour interactive training session focused on types of online abuse and tactics; online safety techniques and strategies, including how to effectively document abuse; and how to create a digital self-care plan. The Glitch website also includes a number of toolkits for download, focusing on topics like documenting online abuse and being an active online bystander.<sup>34</sup>

31 Jess Phillips, *Everywoman: One Woman's Truth about Speaking the Truth*. (London: Hutchinson, 2017).

32 Emily Mertz, "'ParityBOT' uses AI to combat negative tweets toward female candidates", Global News website, 27 September 2019, <<https://globalnews.ca/news/5951313/paritybot-twitter-women-candidates-politics-ai/>>.

33 For a list of sample training courses offered by Glitch, see <[https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Glitch\\_Workshops\\_September2021.pdf](https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Glitch_Workshops_September2021.pdf)>.

34 <<https://glitchcharity.co.uk/resources/>>.

The **European Women's Lobby** developed, and published in 2017, the #HerNetHerRights toolkit, accompanied by training courses that tackle online violence against women in general. The toolkit analyses the prevalence of online violence in Europe, provides policy recommendations to decision-makers and gives guidance to women for their online security.<sup>35</sup>

## Training men

In addition to giving women the tools to increase their safety, some civil society organizations have also turned their focus to men in politics to consider the role they might play in creating a safer environment for women in politics. In 2020, for example, NDI launched the Men, Power, and Politics initiative to engage male political leaders as transformative agents of change for gender equality, recognizing that patriarchal gender norms have led to the continued marginalization of women from political life. NDI's programme guidance outlines a series of linked exercises for men in politics to personalize the issue of gender to better understand their own disproportionate power and privilege; to professionalize this new understanding by applying it to how gender norms impact broader political contexts and political organizations; and to leverage this increased understanding to strategize how to achieve organizational change and broader gender-equality efforts in ways that are accountable to women.<sup>36</sup>

## Support services

Civil society actors, especially women's organizations, often have extensive experience in providing services for victims and survivors of gender-based violence, such as shelters, helplines, counselling, and free legal aid. This expertise can be mobilized to develop programmes for women in politics as well.

## Promoting self-care

Self-care is a core pillar of the digital safety training course offered by Glitch, the **UK** charity. Organizations working with women human rights defenders have also emphasized the importance of self-care for targets of violence against women in politics.

35 "#HerNetHerRights Resource Pack on ending online violence against women & girls in Europe", European Women's Lobby, November 2017, <[https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/hernetherrights\\_resource\\_pack\\_2017\\_web\\_version.pdf](https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/hernetherrights_resource_pack_2017_web_version.pdf)>.

36 Caroline Hubbard and Alan Greig, "Men, Power and Politics Program Guidance", National Democratic Institute, November 2020, <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Men%20Power%20and%20Politics%20Program%20Guidance%2011\\_20\\_2020%206.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Men%20Power%20and%20Politics%20Program%20Guidance%2011_20_2020%206.pdf)>.



## MOBILIZING FOR POLICY REFORMS

This toolkit has primarily focused on actions that civil society actors might take in the sphere of civil society to prevent and respond to violence against women in politics. However, they may also play an important role in mobilizing others to act as well. Soon after its founding in 1999, the Association of Locally-Elected Women of **Bolivia** (ACOBOL) began to receive reports of violent incidents against female councillors and mayors around the country. After realizing the attacks were not isolated events, they began distributing surveys at their meetings to gain a better sense of the form and frequency of such acts. In 2001, the network started working with state and other civil society organizations to draft a bill on political harassment and violence against women. The bill was discussed on numerous occasions in parliament, and eventually became law in 2012. One of the hallmarks of the bill is the wide-ranging list of examples of harassment and violence, reflecting the work of ACOBOL, drawing on testimonies from more than 4,000 locally elected women.<sup>37</sup>

37 Mona Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "The Cost of Doing Politics? Analyzing Violence and Harassment against Female Politicians", *Perspectives on Politics* 18(3), 2020, pp. 740-755, <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/cost-of-doing-politics-analyzing-violence-and-harassment-against-female-politicians/997569433135FA170B2789C88A48DD17>>.

# Checklist for Civil Society Actors

Civil society can play a vital role in combating violence against women in politics by raising awareness, collecting data, creating a safer environment, providing support services and mobilizing for policy reform. While not all strategies may be effective or appropriate in all contexts, the following checklist offers some ideas to consider based on emerging promising practices across the OSCE region and around the world.

## RAISING AWARENESS

- Write an open letter speaking out on violence against women in politics
- Create a memorable hashtag or use existing ones to raise awareness of violence against women in politics
- Establish a formal network to campaign against violence against women in politics
- Create informal networks to support other women in politics experiencing violence
- Enlist male allies to speak out against violence against women in politics
- Inform the general public about violence against women in politics

## COLLECTING DATA

- Set up alternative reporting mechanisms for women to anonymously share their experiences with violence against women in politics
- Use crowd-sourcing to collect data on incidents of violence against women in politics
- Conduct original surveys on the types, frequency and impact of violence against women in politics
- Analyse public discourse on women in politics to detect violence against women in politics
- Collect and analyse data on online violence against women in politics
- Mix methods to get a fuller picture of violence against women in politics

## **CREATING A SAFER ENVIRONMENT**

- Use counter-speech to counteract online violence against women in politics
- Express solidarity with women facing violence against women in politics
- Assist with safety assessments for women in politics to avoid or mitigate violence
- Develop online and offline safety strategies to counteract violence against women in politics
- Train men to raise their awareness and will to tackle violence against women in politics
- Develop services for victims of violence against women in politics
- Promote self-care as a strategy for responding to violence against women in politics

## **MOBILIZING FOR POLICY REFORMS**

- Create networks to mobilize for policy reforms on violence against women in politics
- Seek allies in the state, parliament, and political parties to support legislative reform
- Use women's experiences to inform legislation on violence against women in politics



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