

# Toolkit on Social Media Policies for Political Parties

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National Women's Council

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An Roinn Tithíochta,  
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta  
Department of Housing,  
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# Overview

Women are increasingly present in political life at a global level, largely due to the adoption of equality measures such as gender quotas. But despite the progress observed in recent decades, women remain under-represented in political institutions, particularly women from minoritised and marginalised groups. Sexist attitudes and gender-based violence against women candidates and representatives remain a key barrier to achieving gender equality in politics.

The United Nations report on Violence Against Women In Politics (VAWIP) defines the phenomenon as “any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately”.<sup>1</sup> This violence is rooted in the social norms that dictate what the roles of women and men in a society should be.

VAWIP is a highly misogynistic form of behaviour, usually but not exclusively perpetrated by men, and targets women as women in an attempt to silence them as political actors.<sup>2</sup> The definition broadly includes online abuse, verbal harassment, visual harassment, stalking, intimidation, unwelcome sexual advances, and acts of physical or sexual assault. The risk is elevated during the election period.<sup>3</sup> Online spaces, particularly social media platforms, have been shown to undermine women’s right to participate fully and equally in political life. While social media has contributed significantly to an increase in attacks on all politicians regardless of gender, studies conclude that the abuse women in politics receive is often highly gendered in its context.<sup>4</sup> The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) states that “social media has become the number one place in which psychological violence – particularly in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats – is perpetrated against women parliamentarians”.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Council of Europe, 2020

2 McGing, 2021(a)

3 Krook, 2020

4 Council of Europe, 2020

5 IPU, 2016

Studies show that VAWIP is highly racialised, with black and minority ethnic women disproportionately targeted for abuse, particularly in online settings.<sup>6</sup> Younger women and LGBTQ+ women in politics similarly face a heightened risk of abuse. It also impacts family members, including children, who are not in the public eye.

VAWIP has serious implications for the functioning of democratic governance. In addition to the emotional and professional consequences of gender-based violence, women incumbents may decide to drop out of politics, while other women may refrain from putting themselves forward for selection or election.<sup>7</sup> VAWIP may also impact on the substantive representation of women's issues. Research shows that female representatives with a record of defending women's rights and raising feminist issues are targeted with more online abuse.<sup>8</sup>

Reports have come to light on women's experiences of violence and harassment in Irish politics. In September 2020, a survey conducted by the Irish Examiner showed that 12 of 35 women TDs serving in the Dáil had been subjected to sexual harassment at some point in their life.<sup>9</sup> In August 2021, the same paper detailed the serious cases of sexual harassment experienced by three women TDs, one named and two anonymous.<sup>10</sup>

A study commissioned by the National Women's Council (NWC) on women candidates who ran in the 2019 local elections reported cases of sexist abuse and stalking and for ethnic minority candidates, racist and sexist abuse.<sup>11</sup> Social media was identified by participants as an area where women running for office were subjected to considerable abuse. If they also belong to a minority group, such as being Black or Asian, extreme forms of abuse online are more likely.<sup>12</sup> In 2020, another NWC study found that 35 per cent of women councillors have experienced sexual harassment or sexual misconduct in their political role.<sup>13</sup>

A qualitative study undertaken by NUI Galway's Journalism and Communications unit in 2020 found that 96 per cent of current and former women politicians, at national and local level, have received social media or email messages that used threatening or hateful language, while three-quarters report being threatened with physical violence via online or social media.<sup>14</sup> 40 per cent have been threatened with sexual violence, while a quarter say they have been verbally abused in public.

Recent research by Ian Richardson, a data scientist and election tally expert, shows that in the period between September 2020 and September 2021, female councillors in Ireland received eight times as many abusive tweets per follower than their male colleagues.<sup>15</sup> Local government experience is

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6 Krook, 2020

7 Council of Europe, 2020

8 IPU, 2016

9 Moore, 2020

10 Moore, 2021

11 Cullen & McGing, 2019

12 Harmer & Southern, 2021

13 McGing, 2021(b)

14 NUI Galway, 2020

15 Richardson, 2021

an important route to national office, including for candidates from migrant backgrounds, and is statistically more significant for women candidates than it is for men.<sup>16</sup> The disproportionate levels of online abuse that female councillors experience may have a negative impact on gender balance in national politics if female councillors decide to withdraw from social media engagement, or even politics altogether.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Richardson's study also demonstrates that while there was near parity on the relative level of abuse received by both male and female TDs, female senators received three times as many abusive tweets per follower compared to male senators.

Politics and the internet have become almost inseparable in the modern age of representative democracy. Social media is increasingly being utilised by candidates and politicians to build a public profile, engage with voters (including new and younger voters), and pick up media coverage. There is an argument to be made that because of its low cost (in financial terms), social media "can serve as an equaliser for female parliamentarians who are otherwise politically disadvantaged"<sup>18</sup>. According to a European Parliament study in 2013, social media can be especially impactful for younger and unelected women.<sup>19</sup> While 'knocking on doors' and 'pounding the pavements' remains the primary (and most electorally advantageous) form of campaigning in Irish politics, the majority of candidates, women and men, supplement physical campaigning with a presence on social media, usually across multiple platforms.<sup>20</sup> Political communication through digital means was heightened during the covid-19 pandemic as traditional methods of campaigning had to be restricted or ceased. However, greater reliance on online campaigning and voter engagement exacerbated the abuse of political women.<sup>21</sup>

Social media platforms, political parties, and government institutions must all play an active role in combatting online abuse against women in politics, and gender-based violence on the internet more broadly.<sup>22</sup> Legal reforms have recently been enacted in Ireland relating to cyber-bullying and image-based sexual abuse, namely 'Coco's Law'. The government plans on implementing new legislation and has published the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill (2022), to regulate online services – including social media sites - and deal with certain harmful online content. Meanwhile, as the 'gatekeepers' to elected office (apart from candidates who contest as independents) and of women's political participation in particular, political parties have a duty to recognise and take concrete steps to address gender-based online abuse, take a zero-tolerance approach to perpetrators, and provide support for survivors.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cullen & McGing, 2019; Lima, 2020

<sup>17</sup> McGing, 2021(a)

<sup>18</sup> Ace Project, 2022

<sup>19</sup> European Union, 2013

<sup>20</sup> Donohue, 2020

<sup>21</sup> Carnegie Endowment, 2020

<sup>22</sup> National Democratic Institute, 2021

<sup>23</sup> National Democratic Institute, 2021

# Background of the Research and Methodology

This report is the result of a research project for the NWC, launched as part of a campaign to increase women's political participation by tackling social media abuse. This effort is focused on highlighting: a) how women in politics are frequent targets of abuse and threats online, b) the way online social media threatens to silence women as political actors, c) how it has become a major obstacle to women's political participation and d) the crucial role political parties must play in ensuring women candidates and parliamentarians feel safe in conducting their public roles.

In addition to a three-part webinar series run in 2021 by NWC featuring talks on tackling online political violence targeting women in politics, this report examines the measures currently implemented by Irish politics parties to manage social media abuse, including hateful, sexist and gendered content.

As discussed, political parties are important stakeholders in tackling VAWIP; nonetheless limited baseline information exists on Irish party policies in this area, or on supports for survivors. In particular, this report identifies the supporting mechanisms that are available for female party members, as well as the policies and procedures used by parties in response to complaints raised by members, safety measures, and protocols to safeguard that women in politics feel safe in performing their public duties.

Arising from the findings of this baseline research and a review of best practice measures, a toolkit has been developed which establishes a set of common goals and guidelines on how Irish party organisations can better respond to social media abuse against women. These results can also be extended to racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalised groups.

## Methodology

The toolkit is based on an analysis of information provided by Irish political parties. The research carried out for the design of the toolkit includes primary and secondary sources, a brief systematic review of the academic literature on political violence against women online, a desk review of political party internal policies and codes of conduct related to social media, where available, and an online survey.

An electronic survey of Ireland's major political parties was carried out to understand how parties deal with online abuse and harassment of female

party members. This includes ordinary party members, election candidates, and office-holders. The authors developed a comprehensive online survey for political parties, which was administered between November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 and December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021. In cooperation with NWC officers, party representatives were identified and contacted to participate in the survey. The survey was submitted to *all* political parties with representation in Dáil Éireann, Seanad Éireann, and at local government level at the time of data collection, one survey per party. Reminder emails were sent to identified representatives. In total, seven parties responded to the survey. These parties were: Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, Labour Party, Social Democrats, and PBP-Solidarity. Although the survey asked respondents to identify the party's name in their responses, the survey results are published anonymously. The survey also included open text boxes for respondents to expand or elaborate on their answers, thus generating relevant material for qualitative analysis.

The 32-question survey for political parties explored the following themes:

- Existing specialised officers to deal with diversity and equality issues.
- Existing internal party policies and codes of conduct related to social media.
- Existence of mechanisms to support female party members affected by online political violence, such as training and counselling.
- Existence of an action plan to prevent online harassment of female party members.

This research was carried out in line with the best international research practices regarding its ethical foundation. All participants received detailed information about the purposes and objectives of the research and how the results would be used.

The scope of this study is limited by the number of parties that responded to the survey. Thus, the findings in this report are not representative of all parties in the jurisdiction. Notwithstanding this limitation, this report offers valuable preliminary insights into the policies that political parties currently have in place to manage social media abuse against female members, as well as practical steps to develop targeted interventions aimed at increasing women's participation in Irish politics.



# Survey Results

## Party Statutes and Codes of Conduct

Internal party regulations play a key role in ensuring parties operate more democratically, and that their practices and rules promote gender equality for members.<sup>24</sup> All survey respondents indicated that their party constitution or code of conduct addresses threats, abuse, intimidation, bullying, harassment, and violence against or by party members. Interestingly, all seven parties affirmed they have codes of conduct regulating members' online behaviour (e.g. on social media), but only four of those codes specifically address protecting female members from online abuse, according to survey respondents.

Zooming into the types of online abuse that are covered in party documents, five parties affirmed their policies include protections against hate speech, harassment, derogatory comments or insults, verbal threats, and rape or death threats (see Figure 1). Four parties declared to protecting female members against trolling and three parties protect against defamation, cyberstalking, and visual harassment. Two party organisations have regulations that protect female members against image-based sexual abuse. Only one party has stated it protects members against doxing (the act of publicly revealing previously private personal information about an individual online). These results suggest that most constitutions and internal party codes still do not cover the various types of abuse that women in politics face online.

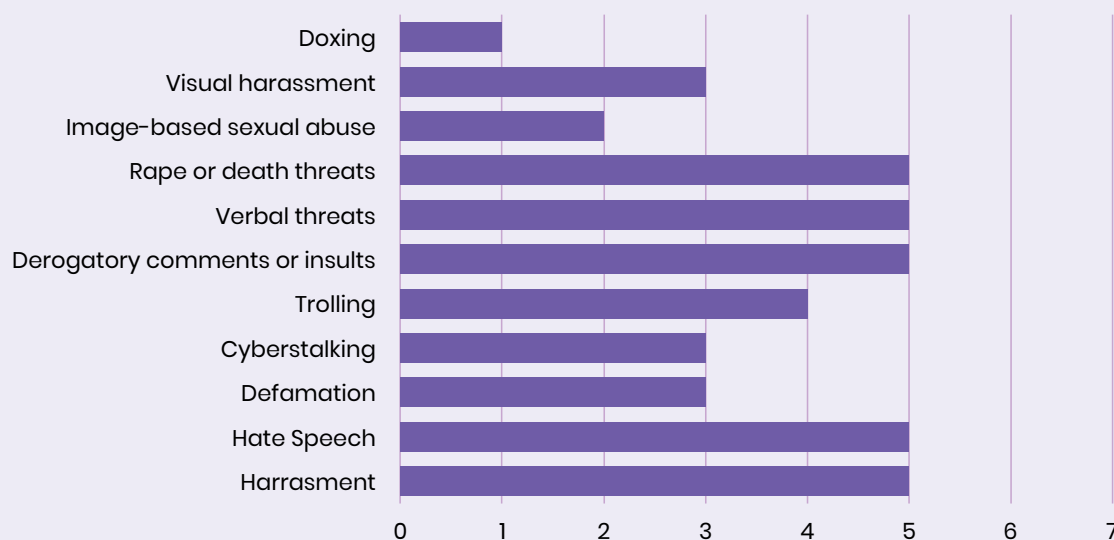
Women in politics already face a disproportionate amount of online abuse compared to men<sup>25</sup>, especially when women are from minority groups. Political parties have a responsibility to protect their members and ensure that women party members are represented and able to actively participate in public life. Therefore, Irish political parties need to update their relevant party documents to reflect the current levels of political intolerance faced by women online.

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<sup>24</sup> OSCE, 2014

<sup>25</sup> Harmer & Southern, 2021; Collignon & Rüdig, 2021

**Figure 1** – Types of online abuse covered by party documents<sup>26</sup>



## Specialist Staff: Equality/Diversity Officers

A subset of survey questions on how political parties are tackling social media abuse aimed to identify the formal structures currently in place to support, engage, guide, and protect female party members (and other under-represented groups).

While five out of seven surveyed parties refer to gender equality values in their party statutes or code of conduct, not all have specific internal structures for women members (e.g. a women's group or women's network). Of these five, only four have women's groups and network structures articulated in the party's written statutes. Recent research has shown that women's organisations in political parties are critical to advancing gender equality<sup>26</sup>. In Ireland, recent research has also shown very high levels of interest in cross-party collaboration among women councillors to participate in caucuses.<sup>27</sup>

The majority of the parties have staff designated as 'equality officer' or similar, who typically operate as agents of integration, raise internal awareness of party's policies, bring up sensitive issues, promote potential new candidates and act as a point of contact with minority communities. Six of the seven respondents indicated having an 'equality officer or similar'. In addition, five of the seven parties, there is a designated officer (with some overlap with the above) in charge of recruiting minority groups as members and/or candidates (e.g. women, people with disabilities, people of colour,

<sup>26</sup> Kantola, 2019

<sup>27</sup> McGing, 2021(b)

migrants, etc). The title of these roles varies across parties and while some speak directly to women's equality, in other parties the title is linked to equality and inclusion more broadly. The name variation suggests that staff working in equality functions in Irish political parties have different roles and functions depending on the party, which might include, besides gender equality issues, topics relevant to disabled, migrants, BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic), and LGBT+ members.

Importantly, the equality officer's role is critical for political parties to address hostility on social media platforms. This position must be anchored in the structure of political parties so that officers receive support from the party leadership to address issues raised by party members. When it comes to online abuse against women party members, it is imperative that equality officers have access to networks, training and resources to create more internal awareness of the impact of online violence on women, and to be able to respond effectively.

## Reporting Mechanisms

Research has shown that violence against women in politics is largely underreported as a result of the culture of silence and impunity associated with it. In addition to all the reasons that prevent women from denouncing other forms of gender-based violence<sup>28</sup>, candidates sometimes conceal threats and other types of aggression against them in an attempt to not appear weak or unfit for the world of politics.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, reporting mechanisms that are gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, timely, and effective can encourage women party members to report or flag of illegal and hateful online content.

Regarding reporting mechanisms, there are considerable differences between the parties. The majority of the parties (five) confirmed they have reporting procedures for cases of online abuse against female members. However, when respondents were asked to describe these mechanisms, it was clear that they are the same for any other type of complaint. So, when VAWIP happens, complaints are made through regular complaints processes, which in turn may or may not lead to disciplinary action. In other words, there is no specific mechanisms for reports of online abuse.

Independent female politicians are particularly exposed to VAWIP online and offline because there is often no party structure for them to make a complaint. While three parties said they have a reporting mechanism for cases of online abuse against women who are not members (e.g. women representatives in other parties or independents), independent women politicians rely on the framework of parties' reporting mechanisms and only if complaints relate to someone who is a member of a political party.

National and local institutions often have policies or regulations and complaints mechanisms for reporting incidents of violence.<sup>30</sup> Respondents

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28 Decker at, 2019

29 Ballington, 2017

30 UN Women, 2021

were asked to explain what the party's internal procedures are when a female party member is abused online. All parties stated that an internal investigation takes place when a member reports abuse online. In addition, five parties said they encourage party members to report the issue to the police (Gardaí) and five said they encourage members to report cases of online abuse to the relevant social media platform. One party added that it usually advises blocking abusive accounts and reporting offensive material. Overall, it appears that when reporting occurs, some procedures follow, but it is unclear how many cases go unreported and whether these procedures can address the abuse.

Women in politics also face VAWIP from fellow politicians and party members.<sup>31</sup> When asked whether the party has guidelines in place for regulating online behaviour between party members, the majority of the respondents confirmed they do exist. However, the survey results show that those procedures are regular complaints procedures and that internal party procedures only apply when the perpetrator or the person abused is a member of the party. In the majority of the parties, when the perpetrator is a member of a rival party or independent politician, procedures remain the same. When the perpetrator is a member of the public, none of the parties appear to have internal procedures to address or support women members who experienced online abuse.

Regarding data collection on online abuse against women members, none of the parties collate this type of data. To ensure the design and implementation of effective policies to combat VAWIP (both online and offline), it is first necessary to understand the nature and extent of the phenomenon<sup>32</sup>. For this reason, together with establishing procedures for reporting and handling of complaints made in relation to VAWIP, political parties need to create mechanisms to monitor and report on the prevalence and incidence of online abuse as a central strategy to support women in politics.

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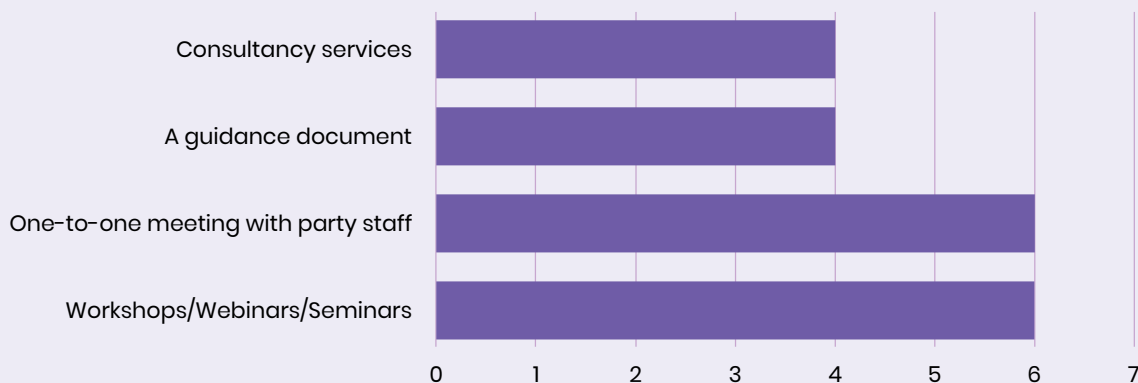
31 National Democratic Institute, 2021

32 European Institute of Gender Equality, 2021

## Training and Support

Political parties often provide training for party members and prospective party candidates. The survey asked parties how they support female candidates to be active online, including on social media. All parties participating in the study said they provide training, including workshops, seminars, webinars, and individual meetings. Four parties confirmed they offer consultancy services and guidelines to their female party members (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2** – Supports provided by political parties to women candidates to be active online



Four parties indicated that they offer specific training or guidelines orientated towards newly recruited women candidates. Training and guidance for new candidates is positive for women's engagement and permanence in politics. Previous studies have shown that poor regulation of online abuse by social media platforms forces female politicians to limit their interactions and even drives women off social media platforms completely.<sup>33</sup> The provision of skills development for women and men party members on preventing and addressing VAWIP within the party can help women to remain on social media platforms, reclaiming that space, interacting with the public, and expressing themselves.

According to the survey data, two parties confirmed they offer counselling support to women candidates impacted by online abuse. The high-level of toxicity associated with online abuse can leave a long-lasting effect on mental health, sometimes even resulting in withdrawal from public life altogether<sup>34</sup>. The provision of mental services, such as counselling, would offer an additional supporting mechanism to aid survivors.

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International, 2018

<sup>34</sup> Stevens et al 2021; Amnesty International 2018

Taken together, the results suggest that most political parties have made efforts to strengthen women's participation in politics and are generally aware of the need to prevent and combat VAWIP. However, policies, procedures, and current practices are not of enough breadth to address online political violence against women.

Parties appear to be aware that they have a role to play in combating online abuse against women in politics, as they have confirmed that they are planning future activities related to the protection and safety of female members online. These plans often involve training on the party's social media policy and online safety, as well as 'resilience' training. Albeit the idea of building or improving resilience is appealing and useful, academic literature has found that encouraging people to be more resilient can work insidiously to deflect blame, positioning survivors as troubled and needing to adapt.<sup>35</sup> In policy and practice, resilience can be positive in helping people adapt in the face of traumatic events, but it can also catalyse further injustice if resilience training only encourages women politicians to adapt without major changes in society at large. In other words, solutions to the problem of VAWIP must include engagement from all political parties equally<sup>36</sup> and the adoption of internal regulations, codes of conduct, and zero tolerance policies for perpetrators of any form of VAWIP, in addition to supports for survivors.

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<sup>35</sup> Mahdiani and Ungar, 2021

<sup>36</sup> UN Women, 2021

# Recommendations

Internationally, a series of measures have been put forward to tackle VAWIP and include a variety of actors.<sup>37</sup> Arising from the findings of this baseline research and a review of best practice measures, this toolkit establishes a set of common goals and guidelines on how Irish political parties, who are key stakeholders in this area, can better respond to social media abuse against women. These recommendations can also be applied to racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalised groups who face online abuse, where appropriate.

## Cross-party leadership to send out a strong message that VAWIP will not be tolerated

The creation of a Joint Conduct on Political Conduct, similar to the one developed by the Jo Cox Foundation in the UK<sup>38</sup> and signed by the leaders of all Irish parties, which outlines the minimum standards of behaviour expected from all party members.

Party leaders to explicitly call out all forms of VAWIP at annual party conferences, including during televised speeches.

Party leaders to pursue active engagement with the Oireachtas Women's Caucus and members of caucuses at local government level to ascertain cross-party experiences and learn about best practice in different parties.

## Expand equality functions in political parties

- ✓ Strengthen the commitment to gender equality values and gender mainstreaming in the party constitution and/or code of conduct.
- ✓ Enhanced resources for party equality officers (or equivalent post) to advance equality and inclusivity goals throughout the organisation.
- ✓ Allocation of equality officer roles at the constituency and branch level.

<sup>37</sup> National Democratic Institute, 2021

<sup>38</sup> Jo Cox Foundation, 2021

- ✓ Increased outreach to minority women and other under-represented groups in politics.
- ✓ Engage with civic society organisations and NGOs working to advance the representation of minority groups.

## **Policies, codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms**

Adopt codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, or revise existing ones, explicitly stating there is zero tolerance for any form of VAWIP and with sanctions for non-compliance.

Establish a panel of Designated Contact Persons across various organs of the party who are available to help and who have been trained to deal in a non-judgmental and confidential manner with dignity and respect.

Work closely with the Gardaí to establish a set of clear guidelines for reporting VAWIP, and make this information widely available to members and candidates.

Advocate for actions and regulatory functions for social media companies to ensure they take online abuse seriously and are proactive in tackling it, while also pushing for social media companies to be more transparent about the number of reports of violence against women they deal with, and how they deal with it.

## **Supporting women candidates**

- ✓ Offer mental health services (e.g. counselling) to survivors following a report of political violence. The capacity of these services should be expanded in the period before, during and after an election campaign.
- ✓ Advise survivors to keep a written record of any intimidatory communication or behaviour, and how it made them feel.
- ✓ Provide training and consultancy to female candidates on using safety features on social media platforms, e.g. how to report online abuse, how to mute certain words and accounts, etc.
- ✓ Offer resilience training to female candidates but from a mental health and wellbeing context - not from a point of view where women are told they should just cultivate resilience to abuse.
- ✓ Share a directory and list of support services, helplines, and reporting mechanisms with female candidates.



## Active engagement with party members

- ✓ Require all new and renewing party members to take a pledge to stand against all forms of abuse, both on and offline.
- ✓ Organise a standing party conference meeting on dignity and respect in public life, to include issues relating to gender and race.
- ✓ Train key party officers at constituency and branch level (e.g. chairs, vice-chairs, PRO and social media officers, etc.) on responding to incidents of online abuse and how to support survivors.
- ✓ Actively seek the experiences and recommendations of the membership of the party women's group or women's network (if one exists).
- ✓ Raise awareness of VAWIP with party youth wings and communicate the minimum standards of behaviour expected of members.
- ✓ Educate party members on relevant legislation in this area, for example Coco's Law.
- ✓ Actively engage with all women party members, including those of migrant/minority backgrounds, to create a space where their empowerment and meaningful participation can collaborate with the parties' internal democratic process by addressing issues that affect them (e.g. racism, sexism).

## Collecting data on the problem of VAWIP

Host internal party conversations where high profile elected women describe their experiences of VAWIP.

Conduct biennial culture surveys with party members.

Make an online and anonymous reporting platform available to all party members (similar to the 'Speak Out' tool in the Irish higher education sector).

Carry out focus groups with women and minority candidates following an election campaign.

## Conclusion

Violence and harassment should never be ‘the cost’ of being a woman in politics; nonetheless, it is a lived reality for many politically engaged women, particularly women from minority groups. VAWIP not only has emotional and professional consequences for the survivor, it also impacts on the functioning of democratic governance. The lack of female representation in decision-making roles means that Irish democracy remains ‘unfinished’, and online abuse is an increasing barrier to women’s equality in politics (in addition to other well documented barriers, e.g. caring responsibilities, candidate selection processes, etc.). As key gatekeepers to elected office, political parties have an important role to play in taking a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of VAWIP and to support survivors. This toolkit provides all political party organisations in Ireland with a strategy for progressing a kinder, more civil and respectful, and gender-sensitive approach to politics, online and offline.

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National Women's Council  
100 North King Street  
Dublin 7  
[www.nwc.ie](http://www.nwc.ie)

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