

September 2023

NWC Submission to the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life



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National Women's Council

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The National Women's Council (NWC) is the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland, founded in 1973. We have over 190 member groups and a large and growing community of individual supporters. The ambition of the National Women's Council is an Ireland where every woman enjoys true equality and no woman is left behind. NWC welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the Task force on Safe Participation in Political Life, having particular regard to the challenges women, including minority and marginalised women face in politics today.

Background

Women are increasingly present in public life at a global level, but despite the progress observed in recent decades, women remain underrepresented in political institutions, particularly women from minoritised and marginalised groups. Women face additional barriers in accessing public life. These barriers are well documented and are often referred to as the 5 C's- cash, confidence, culture, candidate selection and care.

Fundamentally, however, sexist attitudes and gender-based violence against women candidates and representatives remain key impediments 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”.¹ Violence against women in political spaces is rooted in deep misogynistic behaviour that targets women to silence them as political actors. 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.

The definition broadly includes online abuse, verbal harassment, visual harassment, stalking, intimidation, unwelcome sexual advances, and acts of physical or sexual assault. The risk increases during election periods. 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.

¹ Council of Europe. 2020. 'Fighting Sexist Violence Against Women in Politics at Local and Regional Level'. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/fighting-sexist-violence-against-women-in-politics-at-local-andregion/1680a0c056>.

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”.²

Studies show that VAWIP is highly racialised, with black and minority ethnic women disproportionately targeted for abuse, particularly in online settings.³ Younger women and LGBTQ+ women in politics similarly face a heightened risk of abuse. VAWIP has serious implications for the functioning of democratic governance. In addition to the psychological, emotional and professional consequences of gender-based violence, VAWIP has a chilling effect on women’s participation. Women may decide to drop out of politics or refrain from putting themselves forward for selection or election.

VAWIP may also impact on the 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.⁴

Similar experiences are reported by women journalists, particularly those who focused their reporting on social justice, women’s rights and politics. ⁵

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.⁶

NWC’s work on VAWIP

NWC’s ‘Women Beyond the Dáil: More Women in Local Government’ 2019 report by Dr Pauline Cullen and Claire McGing reported cases of stalking, as well as racist and sexist abuse of women who ran in the 2019 local elections. They reported high levels of sexist abuse and stalking and for ethnic minority candidates, racist and sexist abuse.⁷

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

² Inter-parliamentary Union - IPU. 2016. ‘Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians’. <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/ issuesbrief-e.pdf>.

³ Krook, Mona Lena. 2020. ‘Violence against Women in Politics’. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Inter-parliamentary Union - IPU. 2016. ‘Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians’. <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/ issuesbrief-e.pdf>.

⁵ Wheatley, Sawn. 2023 ‘Social Media and Online Hostility. Experiences of Women in Irish Journalism’. Report for Irish Research Council and National Women’s Council https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Social_media_and_online_hostility_Experiences_of_women_in_Irish_journalism.pdf

⁶ Moore, Aoife Grace. 2020. ‘Third of female TDs Sexually Harassed’. Irish Examiner. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40048271.html>

⁷ Cullen, Pauline and McGing, Claire. 2019. ‘Women Beyond the Dáil: More Women in Local Government. Dublin, Ireland’. Report for the National Women’s Council. https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/_NWCI_Research_Report_WEB.pdf.

or Asian, extreme forms of abuse online are more likely. In 2020, another NWC study found that 35 per cent of women councillors have experienced sexual harassment or sexual misconduct in their political role.⁸

As part of the European wide Mobilise Against Sexism project, in 2020 NWC held two events specifically addressing targeted sexist and racist attacks on women in public life. With the National Traveller Women's Forum and AkiDwa, the webinar 'Women and Racism', highlighted the need for Hate Crime Legislation that included misogyny. Our 'Women in Politics: Online Abuse' webinar highlighted the wider implications for democracy when many women do not run for office out of fear of being abused and harassed, because they are women.

The issue of VAWIP came up so frequently in NWC's All Island Women's Forum that the Forum held a dedicated webinar on the issue with contributions from several women elected reps. The session also heard from experts working in improving women's security across the island of Ireland, and both the then Northern Ireland Justice Minister Naomi Long and Ireland's then (interim) Minister of Justice Heather Humphreys. The forum examined similarities, and contrasts, in terms of legislation North and South but came to the conclusion that the systemic abuse of women operating in political spaces, be that in politics, the media, or civic society, is endemic across the island. The Forum recommended an urgent need to adopt a joined-up approach to tackling gender-based violence in all its forms.⁹

Social media has become increasingly interlinked with politics. Social media is used by candidates to build a profile, pick up media coverage and reach out to the voter base. It is also an opportunity for fundraising and recruiting volunteers for elections. While it has provided a low cost opportunity for new candidates or those candidates without the backing of a political party, it has also opened up opportunities for anonymised abuse. Research commissioned by NWC in 2022 led to a Social Media *Toolkit* detailing a clear pathway of actions for Irish political parties, developed by Valesca Lima and Claire McGing. This toolkit launched in 2022 assessed how Irish political parties respond to targeted online abuse and what safety measures and protocols they have in place to ensure women parliamentarians feel safe in performing their public duties and how parties can and should respond.¹⁰

Too frequently women elected representatives feel that they must be individually "resilient" to online and verbal abuse that it simply "comes with the territory". However, this abuse is highly gendered and not meted out equally.

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

⁸ McGing, Claire. 2021. 'Women Doing Things Differently'. Dublin, Ireland. Report for the National Women's Council. https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Women_doing_politics_differently_-_establishing_caucus_with_women_councillors.pdf.

⁹ All Island Women's Forum Report 2022 https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_All_Island_Forum.pdf

¹⁰ Lima and McGing, 2022 Toolkit on Social media policies for political parties. Report for National Women's Council https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Toolkit_SocialMediaAbuse_2022FINAL.pdf

language, while 75 percent report being threatened with physical violence via online or social media.¹¹ 40 per cent of respondents have been threatened with sexual violence, while 25 percent 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.

Legal reforms

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.¹²

Legal reforms have recently been enacted in Ireland relating to cyber-bullying and image-based sexual abuse, namely 'Coco's Law'. The Irish government are in the process of introducing more modern legislation around hate speech and hate crimes. This legislation has been long awaited as existing hate speech laws date back to 1989 (Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act) with no effective laws to deal with hate crimes.

Government must counter and prevent misogynistic hate crime through the introduction of new hate crime and incitement to violence legislation, complemented with the introduction of a dedicated Action Plan Against Hate to address hate crime and hate speech against women, including women from minority and marginalised groups.

Social media companies need to step up to the mark and recognise that they have a direct obligation to users, especially those being abused on their platforms. Reporting abuse to these platforms is generally ineffective with very little recourse for victims. The threshold for removing an abusive account is either unclear or too high with platforms often recommending victims ignore or block abusive accounts.

Zero tolerance approach to VAWIP

In Ireland currently, we are witnessing an increased backlash against the advances we have made towards achieving gender equality. Trends of concern include the spread of fundamentalist ideology across the world and the curtailing of civil society spaces. Threats of violence towards elected representatives is increasing. Recent far right mobilisations in Ireland masked as protest against migrants and asylum seekers have escalated into clashes with gardai and arson attacks on migrant makeshift camps and sites identified as possible accommodation centres. Outspoken opponents to these developments have been victims of social media pile ons, threats and even death threats.

¹¹ NUI Galway. 2020. 'Online Abuse and Threats of Violence Against Female Politicians on the Rise'. <https://www.nuigalway.ie/about-us/news-and-events/news-archive/2020/october/online-abuse-and-threats-of-violence-against-female-politicians-on-the-rise.html>.

¹² Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2020. 'How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion'. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/17/how-coronavirus-risks-exacerbating-women-s-political-exclusion-pub-83213>.

Activists, particularly women activists, standing in solidarity with migrants, the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalised groups being attacked by far-right protesters have been threatened and assaulted. This is done in an effort to silence these activists and to deter others from raising their voice.

At the launch of NWCs Social Media Toolkit we received a video message of support from Sue Moore, CEO of the Jo Cox Foundation. Jo Cox MP was murdered in 2016 in an ideologically motivated attack in the UK. Unfortunately, the links between online and verbal abuse of women in politics and extreme violence are not missed by the Jo Cox Foundation.

While it is a lived reality for many politically engaged women, violence and harassment should never be 'the cost' of being a woman in politics. The National Democratic Institute in the US launched a campaign titled "Not the Cost" culminating on its fifth anniversary in a comprehensive report in 2021 highlighting sites of opportunity to tackle VAWIP at all levels of society.¹³ They argue that rooting out VAWIP will require extensive awareness raising, data collection followed by networking and training. They determine there must be accountability and action at every level from civil society to political parties and institutions to media and tech. As VAWIP is multifaceted, the response must be just as diverse.

This problem needs to be tackled proactively by all stakeholders, singly and concurrently. The only effective way to combat VAW is to take a zero-tolerance approach. This means understanding the issue, collecting data to show the scale of the problem, developing robust and meaningful legislation and monitoring its enforcement.

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

Political Parties must strengthen the commitment to gender equality values and gender mainstreaming in the party constitution and/or code of conduct, 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. They must 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.

It is also imperative that social media companies are held to account 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.

VAWIP is an attack on women's rights but crucially is an attack on our democracy with its chilling effect. Sexism and misogyny need to be rooted out of our society. Making our political spaces a safe and equal place for women is crucial to this.

¹³ National Democratic Institute – NDI. 2021. 'Not the Cost – A Renewed Call for Action'. Washington: NDI. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NTC%202021%20ENGLISH%20FINAL.pdf>.

The National Women's Council is available to discuss the content/recommendations outlined in this submission.

Please contact Rachel Coyle at rachelc@nwci.ie for further information.