



Inter-Parliamentary Union  
For democracy. For everyone.



+41 22 919 41 50  
+41 22 919 41 60  
postbox@ipu.org

Chemin du Pommier 5  
CH - 1218 Le Grand-Saconnex  
Geneva  
www.ipu.org

## Issues Brief

October 2018

# Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe

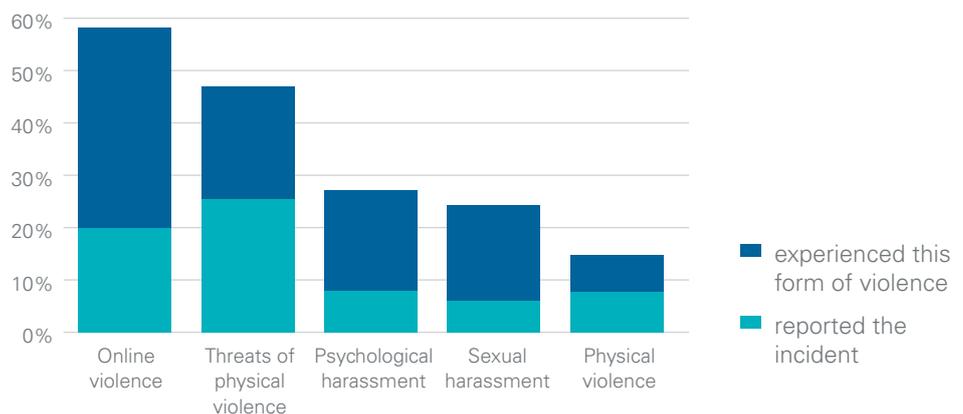
## Key points

### Findings

- This study is based on voluntary one-to-one conversations with 123 women from 45 European countries. 81 of these women were members of parliament (MP) and 42 were members of the parliamentary staff.
- The study shows that acts of sexism, abuse and violence against women are indeed to be found in parliaments in Europe. The extent and nature of these acts, which are violations of fundamental rights, need to be addressed by parliaments and require action to be taken:
  - **85.2 per cent** of female MPs who took part in the study said that they had suffered psychological violence in the course of their term of office.
  - **46.9 per cent** had received death threats or threats of rape or beating.
  - **58.2 per cent** had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks.
  - **67.9 per cent** had been the target of comments relating to their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes.
  - **24.7 per cent** had suffered sexual violence.
  - **14.8 per cent** had suffered physical violence.
- Female MPs under the age of 40 were more frequently subject to psychological and sexual harassment.
- Female MPs active in the fight against gender inequality and violence against women were often singled out for attack.

### Female MPs surveyed

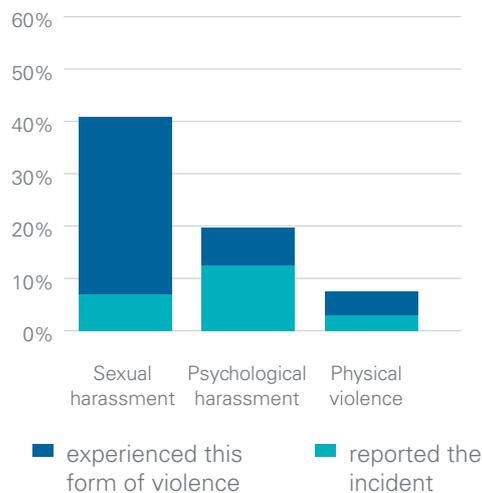
Prevalence of acts of violence and rates of reporting



- The perpetrators of harassment and violence were both political opponents and colleagues from the women's own party, or ordinary citizens.
- The study also shows that there is an alarming amount of sexual and psychological harassment/bullying targeting female parliamentary staff in Europe:
  - **40.5 per cent** of those interviewed said that they had suffered acts of sexual harassment in their work. In **69.2 per cent** of cases, the perpetrators were male MPs.
  - **50 per cent** had received comments of a sexual nature. In **61.5 per cent** of cases, such comments had come from a male MP.
  - **19.5 per cent** of those interviewed had also suffered psychological harassment/bullying in their work in parliament from MPs and colleagues in the parliamentary staff, mostly from men but also from women.
- There was a very low level of reporting of those acts:
  - **23.5 per cent** of female MPs and **6 per cent** of female members of parliamentary staff who had been sexually harassed had reported the incident.
  - **50 per cent** of women MPs who had received threats of physical violence had reported the incidents to the police, the security department in the parliament or another department.
- Several of the women who took part in the survey deplored that there was at present no service or mechanism in their parliament to which they could turn in the event of harassment or violence.
- Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments have negative effects on the physical and psychological health of the people concerned. They also impact the quality and effectiveness of parliamentary work and, consequently, public policies.
- As such, sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments prevent parliaments from being places which are inclusive and representative of society as a whole.
- Parliaments must find comprehensive solutions to prevent and combat sexism and violence against women in parliaments, including measures to encourage such acts to be reported.

### Female members of parliamentary staff surveyed

Prevalence of acts of violence and rates of reporting



### Response from parliaments

- On the basis of the results of the study and the good practices which have been identified, parliaments are called upon to respond in line with the recommendations given at the end of this study, and in particular to:
  - Make it perfectly clear that sexist behavior, psychological and sexual harassment and gender-based violence in parliament are totally unacceptable, and clearly state what remedies are available to MPs and parliamentary staff;
  - Ensure that those who believe they are victims of harassment and assault can have access to assistance and advice services offering total confidentiality;
  - Put in place a complaints and investigation mechanism which is confidential, fair and responsive to victims' concerns;
  - Introduce and apply disciplinary sanctions against the perpetrators;
  - Run training for all persons working in parliament on respect at work and the fight against sexism and harassment;
  - Conduct surveys on sexism, harassment and violence against women in each parliament in line with the approach adopted in this study.

# Introduction

In a democracy, parliament must be a model institution at all levels and a place of work where women and men can fulfil their duties on an equal footing, with complete freedom and in total security. This is important for the effectiveness of the institution, for the image of parliament in the eyes of the public and for the model it can play in achieving gender equality in society.

However, in 2016, an Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) study,<sup>1</sup> based on interviews with 55 female MPs from 39 countries covering the five regions of the world showed that daily sexism and gender-based violence were universal and systemic problems in the world of parliaments.<sup>2</sup> It also showed that sexism, harassment and violence against female MPs had the short- and long- term consequences of hindering women's access to leadership positions and their full contribution to political processes. In this respect, the systemic occurrence of these problems in parliaments is prejudicial to democratic institutions and to democracy itself.

This regional study seeks to take these initial findings further, focusing specifically on the situation in parliaments in Europe. It is the result of close collaboration between the IPU and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and is the first in a series of regional studies that the IPU wishes to conduct on the subject. The study also broadens the scope of the research to include harassment and violence against female parliamentary staff.

Based on interviews with 123 female MPs and parliamentary staff in Council of Europe member States, the survey continues the work already carried out to provide figures and document a range of sexist and violent behavior against women in parliaments. It also seeks to assess the extent and highlight the particular forms of such abuse in Europe. The study therefore aims to break the silence and persistent taboos and to contribute to the fight against gender-based behavior and violence wherever they occur.

In addition, by analysing the impacts and causes of sexism, harassment and violence through the experience of women in parliaments in Europe, and by describing the responses to this problem by parliaments in the region, the study also identifies priority measures to ensure that MPs and parliamentary staff can perform their duties in a respectful, safe and protective institutional culture and working environment.

Publication of these results shows that it is now time for parliaments, in Europe and elsewhere in the world, to take action, set an example and implement a zero tolerance approach vis-à-vis sexist harassment and violence, in both their policies and their practices.

## Methodology

The study data were collected through confidential interviews with 123 female MPs and parliamentary staff from 45<sup>3</sup> of the 47 Council of Europe member States between January and June 2018. For each country, one to five women elected to or working in parliament were interviewed. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, on the margins of the respective sessions of the IPU and PACE Assemblies, or by telephone or Skype, using a questionnaire designed by the IPU for its international study *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, conducted in 2016.<sup>4</sup> All female members of national delegations to the IPU and PACE were invited to participate. Since participation in the study was voluntary, the results presented reflect the responses given during the interviews. This study is not based on a statistically representative sample. Nevertheless, the results of the study indicate that there is a problem that has been largely neglected.

Participants were asked about their perceptions and experiences of psychological, sexual, physical and economic abuse to which they may have been exposed during their parliamentary term or in the course of their work in parliament. They were also asked about the causes of such acts, the effects they may have had on them and about solutions enabling such acts to be prevented and remedied.

The study also draws on data provided by a number of parliaments in Europe on policies and mechanisms to combat sexist behavior, sexual harassment and gender-based violence in parliament as a workplace.<sup>5</sup> However, given the limited number of parliaments that completed a questionnaire to this end, we are unable to say how many parliaments in Europe have policies and mechanisms in place to combat harassment and gender-based violence in parliaments. Nevertheless, the replies received provide an initial overview of existing parliamentary measures.<sup>6</sup> An analysis of the available literature and press articles on the topic supplements the sources of information.

The study intentionally focused on female MPs and parliamentary staff, who are most affected by gender-based violence in parliaments compared to their male colleagues. For the time being, it does not compare the experience of these women with that of their male counterparts, but nonetheless acknowledges that the latter may also be affected by this type of violence which undermines the proper functioning and inclusive working environment of parliament.<sup>7</sup>

# Legal framework and definitions

Violence and harassment against women in politics, including in parliaments, are flagrant and intolerable violations of fundamental and political rights, including the obligation to ensure that women can participate fully, freely and safely in political processes. These rights are enshrined in several international instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The question of violence against women in politics, whose visibility has increased at international level, will be discussed at the United Nations General Assembly in October 2018 at the presentation of a thematic report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences.

At regional level, the European Convention on Human Rights establishes freedom of expression (Article 10) and the prohibition of discrimination, in particular on grounds of sex (Article 14). It is a powerful tool in the fight against violations of fundamental rights. Another instrument, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention, seeks more specifically to prevent, punish and eliminate all forms of violence against women.<sup>9</sup> This Convention, which currently constitutes the most comprehensive instrument to combat violence against women, covers in detail the different forms of violence that are examined in this study: psychological violence (Article 33), stalking (Article 34), physical violence (Article 35), sexual violence (Article 36) and sexual harassment (Article 40).

The preamble to the Convention states that *“violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women.”* It adds that *“violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.”*

The Convention also provides for a parliamentary dimension to the monitoring of its implementation. It officially invites national parliaments to participate in the monitoring of the measures taken for the implementation of the Convention.<sup>9</sup> The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is also asked to regularly take stock of its implementation.

Ratification of the Istanbul Convention commits States Parties to take measures to combat violence against women in all fields, including in the political and parliamentary world.<sup>10</sup> By no longer tolerating and legitimizing such abuse within parliaments, they can help eliminate violence against women in all other spheres of public and private life and have a positive impact on society as a whole, thereby helping to change mindsets.

## The questions asked in the study

### **Psychological violence:**

#### **In the course of your parliamentary term of office/work in parliament:**

- Have you ever been the subject of sexual or sexist remarks?
- Have you ever been aware of newspapers or the television publishing or broadcasting pictures of you or comments about you that were highly disparaging or which had a sexual connotation? [Question asked to female MPs only]
- Have you ever been aware of pictures of you or comments about you which were extremely humiliating or which had a sexual connotation posted on social networks?
- Have you ever been harassed, in other words been exposed to persistent and intimidating behavior, such as unwelcome attention or verbal contacts, or any form of interaction that frightened you?
- Have you ever received threats of harm to you and/or those close to you (members of your family, friends, etc.)?
- Have you ever been threatened with losing your job or having your professional advancement blocked? [Question asked to female parliamentary staff only]

### **Physical violence**

#### **In the course of your parliamentary term of office/work in parliament:**

- Has anyone ever slapped, pushed or hit you or thrown something at you which could have hurt you?
- Has anyone ever threatened to use or actually used a firearm, knife or any other weapon against you?
- Have you ever been held in confinement against your will, been given a beating or been abducted?

### **Sexual violence**

#### **In the course of your parliamentary term of office/work in parliament:**

- Sexual harassment: Have you ever been the victim of sexual harassment (words or behavior of a degrading or humiliating sexual nature, sexual advances and/or demands for sexual favours)?
- Sexual assault: Have you ever been forced against your will to engage in sexual acts, have sexual intercourse or carry out something of a sexual nature?

### **Economic violence**

#### **In the course of your parliamentary term of office/work in parliament:**

- Have you ever been refused any funds to which you were entitled (for example, for MPs, parliamentary allowances or, for parliamentary staff, salary, performance bonus)?
- Have you ever been refused any parliamentary resources (building, computers, staff, security) to which you were entitled? [Question asked to female MPs only]
- Has your property ever been damaged or destroyed?

## Extent and nature of the problem

*“The world of politics is already very difficult. It’s a power game. As a public figure, we are ready for that. But as women, we have to deal with sexual harassment and gender-based violence as well”,* said one study participant.

- The results of this Europe-wide study confirm those obtained in the framework of the study conducted at global level<sup>11</sup> with regard to female MPs. They show that **85.2 per cent** of respondents had experienced **psychological violence**, of whom **46.9 per cent** reported having received **death threats or threats of rape or beatings**.
- Female MPs in Europe are particular targets of **online attacks**. **58.2 per cent** of those interviewed had experience of abusive, sexual or violent content and behavior on social networks. In addition, electronic communication is the primary means used for threats against female MPs. In **75.5 per cent** of cases, the perpetrators of these threats are anonymous citizens.
- The study shows that being a young female MP can be an aggravating factor. The female MPs surveyed who are under the age of 40 are more targeted by certain forms of sexist and violent acts. **77.3 per cent** of these MPs reported being the subject of sexist and sexual remarks (9 percentage points more than for all female MPs surveyed), **76.2 per cent** had experienced degrading treatment and abuse in the media and social networks (plus 18 percentage points) and **36.4 per cent** had experienced sexual harassment (plus 12 percentage points).
- The study shows the extent to which **sexual and psychological harassment/bullying** are frequent experiences for female parliamentary staff in Europe.
  - **40.5 per cent** of female staff surveyed reported having experienced **sexual harassment** at work and **50 per cent** said that they had been the subject of remarks of a sexual nature. Among these, **69.2 per cent** said that a male MP was the perpetrator or one of the perpetrators of the sexual harassment they had suffered.
  - **19.5 per cent** of respondents had also suffered **psychological harassment/bullying** at work in parliament by MPs and colleagues in the parliamentary staff, mostly men but also women.

This alarming situation requires measures to be taken and implemented by parliaments to combat such violence effectively.

**Table I – Extent and nature of the violence**

Prevalence of the various forms of violence experienced by the female parliamentarians surveyed

Psychological violence	85.2%
Sexual violence	24.7%
Physical violence	14.8%
Economic violence	13.5%

Prevalence of the various forms of violence experienced by the female members of parliamentary staff surveyed

Psychological violence	52.3%
Sexual violence	40.5%
Physical violence	7.1%
Economic violence	9.5%

## The experience of female MPs

### The female MPs who took part in the study

81 female MPs from 40 European countries took part in the study on a voluntary basis. Of these, **91.4 per cent** belonged to a political party, with **50 per cent** of them belonging to a majority party, **41 per cent** to an opposition party, and **7.9 per cent** in other situations. They were of all ages (Table II), with young MPs under 40 years of age representing **27.2 per cent**.

**Table II – Age of female parliamentarians surveyed**

Age of respondents	Percentage
18 - 30	3.7%
31 - 40	23.5%
41 - 45	8.6%
46 - 50	16%
51 - 60	29.6%
61 - 70	16%
71 - 80	2.5%

## Psychological violence

**Table III – Prevalence of instances of psychological violence experienced by all the female MPs surveyed and by those under the age of 40**

	All interviewees	Interviewees under 40
Sexual or sexist remarks	67.9%	77.3%
Pictures or comments which were extremely humiliating or which had a sexual connotation posted on social networks	58.2%	76.2%
Death threats, threats of rape, beatings or abduction	46.9%	50%
Pictures or comments that were highly disparaging or had a sexual connotation published in the press or broadcast on television	39.5%	54.6%
Psychological harassment/bullying/stalking	27.2%	45.5%

### Sexist remarks or remarks with a sexual connotation

**67.9 per cent** of the female MPs responding said that they had suffered sexist or sexual remarks several times in the course of their parliamentary term of office. In **35.6 per cent** of instances, these remarks had been made on the premises of parliament itself, and in **22.1 per cent** of instances on social networks. Respondents also said that they had been the target of such remarks during political meetings, on the telephone or in e-mails, in newspapers, on television and in their private lives.

The people who made these remarks were male colleagues from political parties opposed to the respondents, colleagues from their own party, and voters or citizens. These three groups were cited by respondents in almost equal measure.

Generally speaking, the female MPs interviewed felt that they were subject to personal scrutiny based on physical appearance and gender role stereotypes much more than was the case for their male colleagues. Comments about their physical appearance can take the form of inappropriate and duplicitous compliments, a disparaging joke or crude and misogynistic remarks. Such remarks belittle the competence and legitimacy of female MPs. This is also the case when they are the subject of remarks about women's inferiority, their lack of intelligence and the derisory and merely incidental nature of the policies they promote. One MP summarized how, through sexist comments, female MPs are not taken seriously: *"How do we dress? How do we reconcile our public life with our family life? Did we have to audition to get to where we are? Who did we sleep with? Male MPs are not asked such denigrating questions!"*

Sexist statements about physical appearance and criticism based on gender stereotypes are stark reminders to women that they are not completely welcome in politics. The following are a few examples cited by respondents:

*"There have been times when the members of the Health Committee in Parliament were all women. The press called it the 'hen house'."*

*"A minister said to me during a debate: 'You are so beautiful that I cannot listen to you!'"*

*"During a discussion on government policy against terrorism, a male colleague asked me 'Why would a lady like you with such charm wish to discuss such important issues?'"*

*"There was a photo of me on social networks with the comment: 'She is incompetent but she has a nice smile and lovely legs!'"*

*Comments from male MPs in the Chamber: "You are too young and stupid. Get back to your kitchen."*

*"Stop being hysterical, go back home and satisfy your sexual needs."*

The media help reinforce these negative stereotypes of female MPs. **39.5 per cent** of the respondents felt that newspapers and television broadcast images or comments about them that were highly derogatory or had a sexual connotation. Respondents underlined the degrading nature of articles published in the press such as "Who is the sexiest woman elected?" Some newspapers even organize a "Miss Parliament" contest at the beginning of each parliamentary term, inviting their readers to elect the most beautiful female MP.

### Online attacks and threats

On social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), **58.2 per cent** of the female MPs surveyed said that they had seen images or comments about them which were disparaging or had a sexual connotation. In **66.7 per cent** of cases, abusive, sexual or violent content and behavior on social networks is the work of perpetrators who act remotely and anonymously. Technological features also make it possible for this pernicious content to be spread extremely rapidly, reproduced and remain visible. Moreover, freedom of expression is sometimes unjustly invoked online to justify discriminatory, hostile or violent hate messages and forms of expression that muzzle women's freedom of expression, including in politics, and their right to live without violence.<sup>12</sup>

In most cases, respondents said that they had been the target of repeated misogynous online insults and incitement to hatred, in which they were violently attacked as individuals and as women, particularly because of their political views. The messages cited by respondents, coming under attack especially because of their stance in defence of women's rights, can at times be extremely violent. Some are also the subject of nude photomontages together with crude insults. Others referred to pornographic videos circulating on the internet targeting female MPs.

**46.9 per cent** of the respondents reported receiving messages of death threats, threats of rape and beatings, against them, their children and their families. Electronic communications, through social networks, e-mail or the telephone, are the primary means of delivering these threats against female MPs. In **75.5 per cent** of cases, the perpetrators of these threats are anonymous male citizens:

*"I got an anonymous message saying, 'We're going to kill you. First we're going to beat up your children. Then you will be raped, killed. Your husband and your children, we'll get you all. You can hire bodyguards, but we know where you live. We'll get you all.'"*

*"If you carry on with this political position, you'll be the next Jo Cox."<sup>13</sup>*

*"A pregnant MP defending the rights of refugees has received death threats from extreme right-wing groups targeting her and her baby along the lines of 'You don't deserve to live.'"*

### Psychological harassment/bullying

Acts of intimidation and threats can take the form of psychological harassment such as stalking or systematic bullying. **27.2 per cent** of the respondents said that they had been subject to persistent and intimidating behavior from, in the majority of cases, citizens, but also from male political colleagues. Some said that they had suffered intimidation and attacks, particularly when seeking positions of responsibility, in parliament or in their political parties.

The perpetrators can also be family members. The study shows that domestic violence is a scourge that affects many women, regardless of their social or political status.

*"On each occasion, a colleague tried to convince me by force, physically imposing himself in front of me and talking right into my face in order to intimidate me and make me feel his superiority."*

*"When I applied for a senior position in my party, an influential politician said he would destroy my life. He puts a lot of time and energy into it. He is very persuasive. He's a manipulator."*

*"Some entrepreneurs, who wanted to bribe me in order to get a contract, told me that they would go after my son if I kept refusing. I reported the matter to the police and my son was moved elsewhere for a few months."*

*"I have been pursued and harassed by my husband ever since I was elected as an MP. He cannot accept the fact that I often have to travel and not be around as much."*

### Sexual violence

**Table IV – Prevalence of instances of sexual violence experienced by all the female MPs surveyed and by those under the age of 40**

	All interviewees	Interviewees under 40
Sexual harassment	24.7%	36.4%
Sexual assault	6.2%	13.6%

**24.7 per cent** of the MPs taking part in the study reported having been sexually harassed during their term of office and **6.2 per cent** said that they had been sexually assaulted. In **75.9 per cent** of cases, the sexual violence was committed by male colleagues, both from their own political party and from parties opposed to their own. In **34.4 per cent** of cases, the incidents occurred on parliamentary premises, and during political meetings and election campaigns (same percentage). These figures confirm the extent of sexual harassment and predatory behavior towards women, revealed by the #MeToo movement, including in the political world and in parliaments.

- Some of the frequent examples of sexual harassment cited by respondents:

*"An intrusive hand on the knees, bottom or breasts," "forced kisses."*

*"A colleague hovered around me and said 'I want to squeeze your breasts' or 'I want to sleep with you.'"*

*"A colleague was constantly putting me under pressure, calling me and sending me text messages with sexual content."*

*"At a political meeting, a colleague got angry when I rejected his persistent advances. Another colleague, who was also harassing me, only stopped when I told him I was going to report him to the police."*

### Physical violence

**11.1 per cent** of those interviewed said that they had been slapped, pushed, hit or had something thrown at them; **6.2 per cent** said that someone had threatened to use a weapon against them; and one respondent said that she had been beaten, as a victim of domestic violence.

These instances of physical violence occurred most frequently (in **55%** of cases) during political meetings and in election campaigns.

*"I was jostled at a political meeting and a table was violently knocked over in the middle of a discussion in an attempt to intimidate me."*

## Economic violence

In this area, **10 per cent** of respondents said that their possessions (car, house, office, etc.) had been damaged or destroyed in the course of their term of office, and **75 per cent** said that they had faced systematic obstruction in obtaining the parliamentary resources to which they were entitled.

# The experience of parliamentary staff

## The female members of parliamentary staff who took part in the study

42 female members of parliamentary staff from 32 European countries took part in the study. They were of all ages, with the younger age group being more represented than was the case with the female MPs (table V).

**Table V – Age of the members of parliamentary staff taking part in the study**

Age of respondents	Percentage
18 - 30	14.3%
31 - 40	33.3%
41 - 45	11.9%
46 - 50	16.7%
51 - 60	14.3%
61 - 70	9.5%

They are all civil servants, apart from two who are parliamentary assistants.<sup>14</sup> They belong to three socio-professional groups, shown below with the respective percentages:

**Table VI – Professional groups of the members of parliamentary staff interviewed**

Groups	Percentage
Managerial	32.5%
Executive (Administrative Officer, Secretary)	50%
Clerical (Administrative Assistant)	17.5%

## Sexual remarks and sexual harassment

**50 per cent** of the female parliamentary staff interviewed said that in the course of their work they had been subject to sexist or sexual remarks, including witticisms and smutty jokes that were inappropriate. These remarks were made by male MPs (in **61.5%** of cases) and male colleagues working in parliament (in **34.6%** of cases). Mostly, they were made on parliamentary premises (**43.8%**) and during business trips within the country or abroad (**43.8%**). More than **half** of those interviewed also reported hearing such remarks about another woman, a colleague working in parliament (**54.8%**) or a female MP (**51.2%**).

The interviewees said that most of the inappropriate comments made to female parliamentary staff were of a sexual nature. In the majority of cases, and depending on the context, they could be described as sexual harassment insofar as they create a “hostile working environment”.

Nevertheless, when **40.5 per cent** of respondents said that they had been sexually harassed in the course of their work in parliament, they cited unwanted touching, inappropriate and persistent sexual advances and sexual blackmail as the main conduct constituting sexual harassment. They also reported that **69.2 per cent** of the perpetrators of sexual harassment were male MPs and **30.8 per cent** were male parliamentary staff colleagues. **41.5 per cent** of respondents also reported witnessing sexual harassment against their female colleagues. If we take sexual comments into account when calculating the percentage of sexual harassment, we can estimate that one in two respondents had been confronted with acts of sexual harassment at work.

The majority of cases of sexual harassment of female parliamentary staff were committed while travelling for work at home or abroad (**55.6%** of cases) and on parliamentary premises (**33.3%** of cases). Several respondents gave virtually identical accounts as if it were a recurring situation: while on a mission abroad, an MP made sexual proposals and persistently pursued them, calling and texting them, knocking on the door of their hotel room and passing paper messages under the door.

These results suggest that sexual harassment is widespread in the parliamentary workplace. However, none of the respondents said that they had been victims of serious sexual assaults, such as rape.

- The following are some examples of sexual comments and sexual harassment cited by the interviewees:

*“On a trip abroad, I was accompanying an MP who would whistle at girls, saying “Did you see that beauty?”*

*“At a reception, an MP said to me, ‘My equipment is full of ammunition and I’m always ready to unload’. I left the reception in shock. The next morning I told him that his behavior the day before had been very unprofessional.”*

*“An MP locked me in his office with him in order to make advances and try to give me a hug.”*

*“An MP was harassing an assistant. On a business trip, he tried to force his way into her room. He would send her texts with sexual connotations and threaten to make her lose her job if she didn’t give in to his advances. She reported him. Nevertheless, it was she who had to leave her job, while he remained in office. What’s more, he is still an MP.”*

## Psychological violence and harassment/bullying

**Table VII – Prevalence of the different forms of psychological violence suffered by the female parliamentary staff surveyed**

Sexual or sexist remarks	50%
Psychological harassment/bullying	19.5%
Threatened with loss of job or having professional advancement blocked	9.5%
Pictures or comments which were extremely humiliating or which had a sexual connotation posted on social networks	2.4%
Death threats, threats of rape, beatings or abduction	2.5%

The results of the study showed that **19.5 per cent** of respondents experienced psychological harassment/bullying in their work in parliament from MPs and parliamentary staff colleagues, mostly men but also women. **29.3 per cent** of those surveyed said they had witnessed psychological harassment/bullying of a colleague working in parliament. **9.5 per cent** had been threatened by an MP (male or female) that they would lose their job or have their career advancement blocked.

These results of the study confirm other findings of internal surveys in parliaments in Europe which suggest that psychological harassment/bullying and sexual harassment are very frequent.<sup>15</sup>

- Accounts of psychological harassment/bullying:
  - “I was psychologically harassed by an MP for three months. He wanted to intimidate me, denigrate me and destroy my reputation. He said to me, ‘You’re screwed. Your career is over’. At the meeting of the committee for which I was working, he said: ‘You will agree with me that Ms... is not up to the job, that she is incompetent.’”
  - “I was psychologically harassed by my manager, whose sexual advances I had refused. Everyone was afraid of him and nobody dared stand up for me. He had me systematically redo all the files I had prepared. In the end, he gave me no more tasks. I talked to the personnel department and I was transferred. I was relieved even though I would have liked to stay. Subsequently, this manager treated other female staff the same way with total impunity.”

## Physical violence and financial abuse

Where physical violence was concerned, **7.1 per cent** of those interviewed replied that they had at some point been slapped, physically ill-treated or had something thrown at them while working in parliament.

On the subject of financial abuse, **7.1 per cent** of those interviewed were refused funds to which they were entitled (performance bonus, compensation for overtime) and one had had their personal belongings damaged by a manager who was bullying her.

## Reporting of harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe

The #MeToo movement and the ever-increasing media focus on violence against women have encouraged more women, including in politics, to speak out and report acts of violence, harassment and sexist remarks. However, the findings of the study show that many of these unacceptable acts against women in parliaments still go unreported:

- Only **53.3 per cent** of female parliamentarians and **33.3 per cent** of female parliamentary staff who suffered physical violence reported the incident to the police or other services.
- Only **50 per cent** of female parliamentarians who were threatened with death, rape or a beating reported the incident to the police, the parliament security service or another service. Of female elected representatives having received online abuse, **32.6 per cent** reported it to technical intermediaries (entities managing social networks and website hosts) or other services.
- **27.2 per cent** of female parliamentarians who suffered harassment reported it to the police, the parliament security service or another service.
- About **62.5 per cent** of female parliamentary staff who suffered harassment reported the incident via an internal parliamentary mechanism. However, in all the cases reported the perpetrators were not held responsible for their acts.
- Incidents involving sexual harassment were reported by **23.5 per cent** of female parliamentarians and only **6 per cent** of female parliamentary staff. In these very rare instances of reporting, the female parliamentarians spoke to people within their political party or the police.

Survey participants said that there was currently no service or mechanism in their parliament to which they could turn in the event of being subjected to harassment or violence. Others voiced doubt over the effectiveness or fairness of existing mechanisms for reporting and combating harassment and violence against women in parliaments. Some emphasized that the tendency of their entourage to find them at fault, insinuating that they were being untruthful or had provoked the harassment or violence, had put them off reporting these acts.

Furthermore, the reasons for female parliamentarians not reporting violent incidents and sexual harassment often related to their image and parliamentary career and loyalty to the party:

*“I didn’t report the incident because it would have been a sign of weakness. When you are in politics, you are supposed to be strong and handle anything.”*

*“Reporting sexual harassment further victimizes you. I spoke to my party leader about the colleague who was harassing me and since then he no longer comes on missions abroad.”*

*“I didn’t want to make the incident public. I didn’t want to damage my party.”*

The reasons given by female parliamentary staff show that these acts are regarded as part and parcel of working for and serving parliamentarians.

*“I should have reported the incident to the committee line manager. But this happens to all female staff and nobody ever does anything about it.”*

*“Complaining is useless as all MPs are covered by parliamentary immunity.”*

While parliamentary immunity is fundamental to protecting parliamentarians’ freedom of expression, it is nevertheless not an absolute right. Immunity comes with the job but should not be used to protect a parliamentarian accused of gender-based violence. In some of Europe’s parliaments, parliamentary immunity is not applicable when criminal proceedings are instituted against a parliamentarian accused of gender-based violence. In other parliaments, parliamentary immunity does apply and must be lifted by parliament before criminal proceedings can be brought against a parliamentarian. In one such case, in France, for example, the Speaker of the National Assembly declared that parliamentary immunity could not be a barrier to legal action against a member of parliament for sexual harassment.<sup>16</sup>

The low rates of reporting to the police or other internal parliamentary bodies revealed by the study point to the need for parliaments and other stakeholders (political parties, social network platforms etc.) to gauge the effectiveness of existing measures and come up with solutions catering for the needs of women in parliaments and protecting their rights.

At the end of 2017 in the United Kingdom, a multiparty working group made up of parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and assistants ran a survey among 1,377 people working in parliament which revealed that one in five people working at Westminster had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment or inappropriate conduct in the previous 12 months. The report submitted by the group at the beginning of February 2018 recommended urgent reforms, including a new complaints procedure and an investigation mechanism that was independent of the political parties. Since then, a former High Court judge has been appointed by Parliament to carry out an independent investigation into allegations of harassment of House of Commons staff. The independent expert will establish the nature and scale of the harassment allegations and examine how the complaints have been handled and how existing procedures can be improved. Staff have been invited to testify, and their contributions will remain strictly confidential.

## Effects and impact of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe

### Effects on women

Sexism, harassment and violence against female parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff can harm them physically and emotionally and affect their health and sometimes their ability to do their work.

According to the study, **57.7 per cent** of the female parliamentarians having been subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence stressed that they had been left distraught by what had happened to them. Others had felt humiliated, angered, saddened or disoriented at the time. Several reported that violence or harassment had triggered anxiety, health problems or sleep disorders.

**One third** of them had feared for their safety and that of those close to them. They had sought help from the police and reinforced security to protect themselves and those close to them.

Despite this, the female parliamentarians surveyed who had been victims of harassment and violence were determined and resilient, with **79.2 per cent** of them voicing their determination to pursue their parliamentary mission and run for another term in office.

**59.7 per cent** of the female parliamentary staff who had been subjected to harassment and violence stated that they had been badly shaken by the experience, while **31.6 per cent** of them had feared that they would lose their job. **44.4 per cent** had felt isolated and abandoned, and **52.9 per cent** had emphasized that these incidents had affected their ability to work normally. Stress, loss of appetite, a feeling of helplessness and a loss of trust in parliamentarians were mentioned, with some respondents also stressing that the harm caused had been compounded by embarrassment, shame or anger prompted by the negative attitudes of their entourage, who had doubted their claims and left them feeling guilty. As a result, only **52.9 per cent** of female parliamentary staff who had been victims of harassment or violence wished to speak openly about the problem.

### Impact on parliamentary work and the participation of women in politics

**33.3 per cent** of female parliamentarians stated that the acts of violence to which they had been subjected had affected their freedom of expression and scope for action during their term of office. They admitted to “being more guarded” in what they said and in the stances they took, becoming “more cautious and more watchful” and seeking to be “a little less visible”. Some had decided to limit their presence on social networks or close their account, thereby depriving themselves of outlets for conveying their ideas and debating them. In short, their task as parliamentarians is being complicated by contempt, violence and insecurity. On top of fighting for their ideas, they must also fight

for the right to have ideas, to be able to express themselves freely and to be recognized as politicians and as human beings.

*“The perverse nature of sexist harassment and violence, intended to restrict female politicians’ sphere of influence and scope of action, is not acknowledged.”*

*“One of my colleagues felt devalued. She believed that her opinion counted for nothing and began to voice her views less frequently in the assembly chamber in order not to interfere with ‘male decision-making.’”*

The statements gathered during this study show that sexism, harassment and violence against female parliamentarians may have the effect of restricting the visibility and influence of women in politics. That effect must be acknowledged and countered as it has repercussions for the quality and effectiveness of parliamentary work and public policies. Parliamentary activities suffer not only from the under-representation of female decision-makers but also from the violation of freedom of expression which, sometimes insidiously and sometimes virulently, is inflicted on the female targets of harassment and violence aimed at or having the effect of silencing them.

Harassment and violence against female parliamentarians also have a chilling effect to women entering or remaining in politics, and thereby harm democratic decision-making as well as the integrity and vitality of democracy.

### **Image and smooth running of parliament**

Accordingly, sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments are obstacles to the smooth running of parliaments and their ability to serve as inclusive and representative forums for the whole of society. This behavior is furthermore damaging to the reputation and image of parliamentarians and of parliament as an institution, and its persistence also negatively colours society’s view of what parliament is, its importance among state institutions and how seriously its role and members can be taken. The sexist conduct of members often finds its way onto television screens and social networks, making parliament a public laughing stock and stoking concern and mistrust towards its members.

In addition, through the experiences related by female parliamentary staff, the study also shows that violence and harassment have a financial cost for parliament as a workplace, such as absenteeism, lower productivity, etc.

## **Understanding the phenomenon: its causes and the risk factors**

The phenomenon of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe is a reflection of the violence perpetrated against women in European countries in general, where a whole host of political traditions and practices – drawn from cultures that are still largely patriarchal and

male-dominated – are in use. Even so, there seems to be a convergence of risk factors in the political and parliamentary environment that results in sexism and violence against women occurring on such a large scale and so repeatedly.

To prevent and combat this abuse and violence in Europe’s parliaments, we need to know and understand the situations that female parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff have to deal with. By questioning them on what they perceive as the reasons for the acts of violence against them and their female colleagues, the study provides a keener insight into how the context and working conditions in parliament and politics, as well as other factors, can increase the prevalence of violence and affect victims’ inclination to report such violence. These causes and factors require more in-depth analysis by each parliament and must be taken into account by political institutions when devising concerted responses to sexism and violence against women in parliaments.

### **Male dominance as the norm**

Parliaments are both places of work and political institutions. Like other workplaces, they are an area where men predominate. When entering that area, women, because they are under-represented or do not comply with the established gender norm, may encounter hostility and resistance. Those interviewed, both female parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff, attributed primarily the sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments to gender stereotyping and gender hierarchy. Some respondents mentioned that, for some men, denigrating women and displays of virility was their way of asserting political power. Some would act in this way without always realizing what they were doing, especially the older men, who represented a generation more heavily steeped in the norms of male dominance.

*“A lot of progress has been made over the last two decades but the cultural norm of male predominance in politics is still there.”*

*“When men feel threatened by successful women, they are frightened of losing what they have always had. It is difficult to stamp out that resistance.”*

As a manifestation of the norm of male dominance, the violence suffered by women in politics may be carried out by a number of perpetrators, who are not just from the circle of political adversaries, which is what usually characterizes political violence, or from that of disgruntled and aggressive members of the public. In fact, the study shows that female parliamentarians may be harassed or attacked by male colleagues from their own party. They may also be victims of domestic violence: women who become involved in politics challenge the historically unequal relations between women and men both in the public domain and in the private sphere, which may expose them to heightened violence within the couple or family.

### **Loyalty and silence in the political environment**

Places are rare and precarious in the political world and it is tough to become established. Posts with a high level of responsibility are much sought-after and some are very much

seen by men as their own preserve. Some respondents said that they had been intimidated and attacked when seeking leadership positions, within parliament or their political party. A number of those interviewed also mentioned that *“insinuations or accusations that a female parliamentarian has got where she is today because she slept with someone are commonplace”*. The notion that a woman has made her way in politics by granting sexual favours is still deeply entrenched.

Another important point is that the political party loyalty required from politicians and staff (men and women) acts as a brake on disclosure and complaints.<sup>17</sup> As we have seen, in politics, women may have other reasons for not reporting violence, such as a fear of being seen as politically disloyal or weak. This situation fosters a culture of silence in which abuse, such as bullying and sexual harassment, can flourish and give the perpetrators a form of power and control, as well as a form of sexual gratification.<sup>18</sup>

*“In my eyes it is first and foremost a question of power. Harassment and violence are used as a means of letting us know that men are more powerful and will not give up their place.”*

*“A colleague propositioned me for sex in exchange for a post in the party, and I refused. Afterwards, when I asked another male colleague for a post, he made it clear, by telling a crude and humiliating anecdote, that by refusing to dish out sexual favours, I was opting to deprive myself of support from party colleagues.”*

*“To put an end to impunity, you must name the offenders, even in parliament. But you don’t want to expose people from your own party. You are an elected representative dependent on your voters and it’s above all a question of loyalty.”*

### **Working conditions specific to the parliamentary environment**

Other situations may heighten the risk of violence and harassment in the political and parliamentary context. For example, those working in the parliamentary environment have to work intensively for long periods and late hours. There is also a certain familiarity specific to the political environment, where it is not uncommon for professional and personal boundaries to become blurred, particularly in the course of official journeys, dinners and receptions. The study’s findings confirm that incidents of sexual harassment have occurred on parliamentary premises and during political meetings and election campaigning for female parliamentarians and during official trips abroad and on parliamentary premises for female members of parliamentary staff. Moreover, drinking alcohol was frequently mentioned by the respondents as an additional risk factor.

### **Parliamentarians who abuse their status**

Many of those interviewed also highlighted that the perception of wielding exceptional power bestowed by parliamentary status gave certain politicians a feeling of being all-powerful and impunity. On the topic of sexual harassment, one respondent pointed out that:

*“The ego of some parliamentarians, their feeling of power and their impression that they have everyone admiring them, disconnects them from reality. They can no longer understand or admit to themselves that a woman might not be interested in them, that she doesn’t want their individual or sexual attentions.”*

Male parliamentarians on a political power trip, amid claims of the supposed superiority of men and in the context of hierarchical relations between parliamentarians and parliamentary staff, is seen as one explanation of the scale of bullying and sexual harassment of women in parliament.

*“They think that they are close to you, that they know you. As a member of staff, you depend on them, they are your boss, you are their subordinate and they take advantage of it. Once they’ve had a drink, anything goes.”*

This imbalance of power is all the more flagrant between a parliamentarian and a parliamentary assistant, who will often be employed directly by the parliamentarian. Not having the statute of a civil servant, the assistant does not necessarily have the same protection or job security.

### **An environment that tolerates this kind of conduct**

This feeling of impunity can be bolstered by other factors inherent in the political and parliamentary environment, such as the failure to acknowledge that such a problem exists in the public sphere in general and in parliament in particular and the lack of commitment to eradicate it on the part of institutional managers. A number of survey participants were not aware of any measures, services or institutional arrangements in their parliament to combat sexist behavior, sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the parliamentary workplace. Some said that the situation was not seen as problematic as there had not been any cases of inappropriate behavior or harassment in their parliament to date. Others said that some measures had been taken, having been devised fairly recently, notably in the wake of the #MeToo movement in autumn 2017. Several interviewees said that this movement had prompted female politicians to come forward and triggered debate in parliament, not only resulting in accusations being levelled at high-ranking political leaders but also highlighting the precarious nature of the working environment of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

The lack of effective arrangements in parliaments for complaints, investigation and punishment of those engaging in harassment and violence, and the fact that any arrangements that do exist, are often barely known or seen as unfair are further factors dissuading people from reporting acts of violence.

There are also differences in degrees of protection, depending on a person’s statute or function (parliamentarian, parliamentary official/employee, member of a parliamentarian’s staff employed directly by the parliamentarian). There are more anti-sexual harassment policies applicable to officials or employees of the parliamentary administration than there are applying to parliamentarians and their members of staff. This is due to the contractual relations between officials and the parliament employing them whereas parliamentarians are not employees

of the parliament but elected representatives. In most cases, parliamentarians' staff and assistants are not parliamentary employees either but directly employed by each parliamentarian individually or by a political group. Accordingly, the working relations between parliamentarians themselves and between a parliamentarian as an employer and their assistant have often been overlooked or ignored in policies aimed at combating bullying and sexual harassment in parliaments.

Furthermore, most of the parliaments that have a system for complaints of sexual harassment involving parliamentarians entrust the handling of such complaints to internal bodies, such as a parliamentary ethics committee or a standards and privileges committee for example. Many of these bodies were initially set up to deal with cases of financial misconduct by parliamentarians or breaches of trust for personal enrichment and in many instances are not really suited to dealing with cases of bullying or sexual harassment (no definitions of such conduct, no confidential processes, deliberations made in public etc.). And above all they are political, with power games being an ever-present factor.

*"The Speaker's office and the Committee on procedures should take firm action and impose sanctions but sexist behavior and violence are regarded as minor issues."*

*"Any complaints can be lodged with the Speaker's office but I think that we should have a special, independent procedure for cases of harassment and violence."*

*"We need an action plan, tools to combat harassment and a body for receiving victims' complaints. At present there is a procedure for parliamentary officials but not for elected representatives."*

### **Female parliamentarians: politically motivated violence and gender-based violence**

Being public and political figures, female parliamentarians are at risk from violent behavior stemming from political differences, from both colleagues in politics and members of the public they are mandated to represent.

Violent acts against female parliamentarians often have the characteristics of both politically motivated violence and gender-based violence. The harassment or violence targeting them is aimed at or has the effect of restricting or violating their freedom of expression.

Here, the study confirms that women leading the fight against gender inequality and violence against women or speaking out on other sensitive political issues (combating corruption, taking in refugees etc.) are often prime targets for organized attacks, including by ultra-conservative or anti-feminist groups.

*"Their motivation is political but their preferred weapon is sexism. My opponents are short on political arguments, so they attack me for being a woman."*

*"When I was Education Minister, I was attacked by the religious authorities: 'Who is this woman? She is no position to make statements!'"*

*"They wouldn't attack me as much if I wasn't so committed and argumentative!"*

*"I get bullied because I don't play the role expected of a woman. The rise of the far-right and the pushing of family/religious/national values have a lot to do with this trend. Women are supposed to be decorative and support the national view. This mentality is gaining ground, especially on social networks, where virile and aggressive language is drawing in men (and women) who need to vent their hatred."*

### **Other risk factors and the combined impact of contexts and risk factors**

The study shows that being young can be an aggravating factor. Looking at the findings in relation to young female parliamentarians below 40 years of age, we can see that they are more commonly targeted by sexist and sexual remarks (plus 9 percentage points), degrading treatment and abuse in media and on social networks (plus 18 percentage points) and sexual harassment (plus 12 percentage points). Young female parliamentarians may also be attacked more frequently online because they are more present and active on social networks.

Analysis shows that being a member of the political opposition is also a factor, but less so than age, that may result in female parliamentarians being more exposed to psychological violence, particularly intimidation and threats.

The sample interviewed, based on voluntary participation, does not contain enough women belonging to a minority group or with disabilities to be able to analyse these factors. However, it is important to note that there are other studies showing that these compounding factors result in higher levels of violence and harassment against women belonging to a minority.<sup>19</sup>

### **#MeToo and parliaments in Europe**

The year 2017 was marked by a wave of unprecedented accusations of sexual harassment. After sparking to life in the film industry and gathering momentum under the #MeToo hashtag, the movement quickly spread to many other spheres, including the world of politics and parliaments.

In November 2017, over 300 Icelandic female politicians revealed that they had been subjected to sexual harassment during their career and called on men to "assume their responsibilities". The Swedish Parliament held a debate on the #MeToo phenomenon as well as a public seminar, at which parliamentarians and two ministers read out anonymous statements by female politicians who had been victims of sexual abuse during their activities in various parties. Suddenly, it was possible to openly discuss a topic that had previously been taboo within representative bodies, proving, as many suspected, that parliament was not immune to gender-based violence.

As already shown by the IPU study entitled *Sexism, harassment and violence against female parliamentarians* in 2016, awareness of the generalized existence of systemic

abuse is a first step towards a broader process of institutional change. That awareness is also central to the #MeToo movement. While this movement has not had the same impact in all European countries, there have nevertheless been a number of parliamentary initiatives, as of autumn 2017, to meet new requirements of exemplary conduct:

- Some parliaments have set up an **independent structure providing personalized and confidential counselling** for people believing that they have been victims of harassment and abuse (Austria, Switzerland).
- Other parliaments have run **awareness campaigns** to publicize existing measures and means of redress (France, European Parliament).
- Others have improved their **complaints procedures** by incorporating internal investigations (Finland, Sweden).
- In the United Kingdom the House of Commons carried out an **internal investigation and independent inquiry** to shed light on allegations of bullying and sexual harassment and suitable remedial measures.

## Solutions and good practices

The findings of the study and the views of the survey participants have yielded the following pointers for responses and solutions, intended to encourage parliaments and political decision-makers to introduce and implement comprehensive measures to prevent and tackle sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments.

### Having strict, properly enforced laws to prevent and combat violence against women

It is crucial to have strong, correctly applied laws to combat violence against women, including gender-based violence in parliaments. Laws are needed to provide victims with protection and assistance and create conditions in which they can report violence and call the offenders to account. In this connection, ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention, bringing national legislation into line with the Convention, must be a priority.

Given the scale of certain forms of violence recorded by the study, laws and other measures will have to take account of abuse carried out via new technologies such as threats made on-line and other forms of cyber-violence. Parliaments must also ensure that social network platforms take steps to help victims of sexist hate speech, online threats and other cyber-harassment to report this abuse and punish the perpetrators. They could also encourage the police to recognize and systematically investigate cases involving online abuse.

Laws and policies must also be able to tackle the low level of reporting of bullying and sexual harassment at work and in public life. Parliaments must pass laws and adapt national policies on harassment and violence at work if they have not already done so, or improve existing texts and ensure that they are applied. It is vital to provide for effective and confidential complaint mechanisms as well as sanctions against the perpetrators.

Clearly, these laws must be applicable to parliament and parliamentarians in the same way as they are to the rest of society. Accordingly, any parliamentarian under accusation should not enjoy any special status or protection because they hold office. They should benefit from the presumption of innocence but not be able to block justice.

Looking beyond disciplinary and/or criminal punishment, there is also the specific question of their parliamentary mandate and the sanction of ineligibility. The French laws concerning trust in public office of 15 September 2017, for example, now stipulate a compulsory supplementary punishment of ineligibility for anyone found guilty of a crime or misdemeanour, including sexual harassment.

### Reinforcing internal parliamentary policies aimed at eliminating sexism, harassment and gender-based violence

Like any workplace and as the institution that showcases democracy, every parliament has a responsibility to provide the best possible protection for female parliamentarians and parliamentary staff and ensure that it is an inclusive workplace based on respect and equality.

It is for each parliament to find the most effective solutions best suited to its own circumstances. However, any response strategy should cover the following aspects, illustrated here by compelling examples from parliaments around Europe:

- **Clearly pointing out the unacceptable nature of sexist conduct, bullying and sexual harassment, and gender-based violence and the remedies available** to people who believe that they are victims and wish to report incidents. This may be done via specific policies or through the inclusion of provisions in parliamentary regulations, codes of conduct or codes of ethics. It is very important to have clear definitions of sexism<sup>20</sup>, harassment and gender-based violence, including examples of unacceptable behavior, as people can have differing perceptions of a given act.

In Finland, the Guidelines of the Bureau of Parliament for the prevention of inappropriate conduct and harassment (2017) are applicable to parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. This document reiterates the policy of zero tolerance of harassment in relation to the existing legislation on equality, non-discrimination and labour law. It advises on the procedure to follow in the event of harassment and whom to contact. It also provides for a procedure for making an oral or written complaint that will be dealt with in complete confidence and possibly followed up by mediation and an internal investigation. Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff are informed of these arrangements when they start work in the Parliament and the procedures are explained on the intranet.

The study's findings show that official trips and excessive drinking are factors that are likely to heighten the risks of harassment and violence. Specific account should therefore be taken of these risk factors when drawing up standards or codes of conduct describing the conduct to be expected in parliamentary work, from both parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

- **Assessing the situation in parliaments for obtaining detailed information** on instances of harassment and violence experienced by parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and parliamentarians' assistants. This is about ensuring that the policies to be designed and implemented, and work undertaken in order to resolve the issues highlighted by the survey, are based on evidential data, including victims' willingness to report abuse and, where applicable, their satisfaction as regards a system or services already in place. A situation assessment is also an indispensable phase in raising awareness and mobilizing efforts.

See the example of the work carried out by the multi-party group and the independent inquiry in the United Kingdom House of Commons mentioned above.

- **Ensuring that people who believe they are victims of harassment or assaults can access confidential assistance and counselling services.** This may involve a confidential counsellor, a contact person or a hotline/freephone number dedicated to these issues. Some respondents stressed the need for these operatives to be independent and have expertise or at least appropriate training for this role.

The Swiss Parliament has experimented by setting up an independent consultative body specializing in cases of intimidation and sexual harassment, which parliamentarians may contact without revealing their identity. At the Austrian Parliament, in the event of harassment, the parliamentarians of both chambers, the staff of political groups and parliamentary assistants can call on an independent expert, who will provide information and personalized advice on a confidential basis. The prime focus is on prevention and awareness-raising and establishing a climate of respect within the institution.

- **Setting up a complaints and investigation mechanism** that is confidential, ready to listen to victims and fair, so that anyone deciding to report incidents of harassment and violence can feel secure.

During 2017, the Swedish Parliament revised its policy and guidelines on abusive behavior in order to better combat sexism, bullying and sexual harassment perpetrated against parliamentary staff (there is no mechanism in respect of parliamentarians). There is an official procedure for lodging complaints with the head of human resources, and follow-up investigations. This supervised procedure, using written or oral notification, makes it possible to avoid any reprisals and any contact with the person accused over the incident. The investigation is totally confidential. Each of the parties is interviewed individually and may be accompanied by representatives. The interviews are logged, and each party is informed of the progress of the internal investigation. The employer must ensure that the harassment has ceased. The parties may have access to occupational health care. These arrangements are emphasized in training for managers and presented to new employees. Awareness-raising programmes are also to be introduced.

Several of those interviewed would like to see an independent complaints and investigation mechanism in order to avoid situations where people in parliament could be both judges of and parties to a case. There are plenty of arguments to support this viewpoint: parliamentarians do not wish to be judged by their peers and go through a process that is riddled with political point-scoring while parliamentary staff do not trust a mechanism under the dominant influence of parliamentarians or political parties. Furthermore, in view of the imbalance of power between victims and aggressors (particularly when it is a parliamentarian harassing a member of staff or a parliamentary assistant), the media circus surrounding parliamentarians accused of such conduct, the influence that may be brought to bear by a desire to preserve the image and cohesion of political parties, and other aggravating factors identified by the study, independent and confidential procedures appear to be the most appropriate strategy. In the event, each parliament must identify the mechanisms that will be perceived as fair by all the protagonists involved (parliamentarians, employees and assistants; men and women; political parties). Several separate procedures could be established to take account of the very different professional relations that exist between parliamentarians themselves, between parliamentarians and staff working in parliament, and between members of staff working in parliament. Without fair complaints and investigation procedures – catering for the needs and rights of victims while allowing the presumed perpetrators to benefit from the presumption of innocence – the working environment in the parliamentary sphere will continue to be a precarious one.

- **Establishing and enforcing disciplinary sanctions against the perpetrators.** In keeping with the Istanbul Convention, there must be provision for punishment and sanctions in countries' criminal codes and labour law for harassment and gender-based violence. Disciplinary sanctions must also be established in political institutions. In this respect, everything remains to be done in parliaments so that sanctions, determined in relation to the seriousness of the acts, are provided for and actually applied in proven cases of violence and harassment.

At the European Parliament, the advisory committee responsible for dealing with complaints of harassment between assistants and parliamentarians comprises five members, of whom three are parliamentarians chosen by the President of the Parliament from among the institution's quaestors, one member appointed by the accredited parliamentary assistants committee and one representative of the administration. A representative of the medical service and a representative of the legal service of the European Parliament are also present. In a proven case of harassment, following a confidential internal investigation and on the recommendation of the advisory committee, the President can impose a sanction in accordance with Rule 166 of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure (ranging from a reprimand to the suspension or removal of a number of parliamentary functions). There have not been any sanctions imposed against MEPs for sexual harassment to date.

- **Providing training on respect in the workplace and combating sexism and harassment** for everyone working in parliament. This training is indispensable for making it clear what conduct is acceptable or not and how witnesses or victims should react. For it to be truly effective, several of those interviewed stressed that it had to be compulsory for all – parliamentarians, officials and assistants – and especially for managers who should be given a fuller version of the training so that they could provide guidance to people confiding in them. Training must be based on group interaction in order to encourage discussion and the lifting of taboos.

The European Parliament organizes specific courses aimed at preventing inappropriate conduct and harassment and promoting respectful, professional relations in the workplace. Training geared to preventing harassment is provided to all staff members to enable them to recognize, prevent and combat psychological and sexual harassment. Managers are given similar training so that they can prevent and tackle psychological and sexual harassment within their teams. Tailored courses for parliamentarians on the management and staffing of their offices are also being devised. These will emphasize prevention by seeking to develop parliamentarians' management skills in order to avoid conflict with their assistants.

- **Taking communication and awareness-raising initiatives** to help prevent gender-based violence, encourage reporting and protect victims.

In France, a poster campaign at the National Assembly and the Senate gave reminders of the articles of the Criminal Code relating to sexual harassment and useful information on existing victim reception and guidance services.

In addition, any response strategy introduced in parliaments must be monitored on a regular basis and assessed on its effectiveness.

- **Promoting a gender- and equality-sensitive culture in parliament**

Parliaments must acknowledge that they are not neutral on gender and examine how they function through the prism of gender equality. In 2012, the Members of the IPU adopted the *Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments* which defines a gender-sensitive parliament as one in which there are no barriers – substantive, structural or cultural – to women's full participation and to equality between its men and women, whether parliamentarians or staff. A parliament can achieve this by carefully examining its structures, operations and working methods to ensure that they cater for the needs and interests of both men and women. When assessing to what extent it is gender-sensitive, one of the tasks for a parliament is to invite parliamentarians and parliamentary officials to openly consider whether the working environment in parliament guarantees women's and men's rights and security on an equal footing and tackles problems of gender-based violence and harassment in parliament. This approach also makes it possible to identify initiatives that can be taken to consolidate the infrastructure and policies fostering a gender-sensitive culture within parliament.

This process is intended to support parliaments in their efforts to combat violence against women in parliament and become proponents of gender equality and models for the rest of society. In the long term, this helps to strengthen parliaments' contribution to eliminating violence against women.

The Promoting Gender equality in the Riksdag survey<sup>21</sup> conducted in the Swedish Parliament sought to determine whether its members enjoyed the same conditions for the exercise of their mandate. The findings revealed that women were more frequently interrupted when speaking in the assembly chamber and their physical appearance is commented on to a greater extent. Being younger and female exposes them more to sexist and inappropriate behavior.

### Transforming political culture and mentalities

- **Adopting internal procedures for political parties against sexism and violence against women and applying them**

Numerous study participants mentioned the importance of having codes of conduct and internal procedures against abuse and violence against women in political parties. They pointed out that the greater the commitment of political parties and their leadership to no longer tolerating such abuse, the greater the chances of making the elimination of harassment and violence against women in politics a non-partisan issue involving all the stakeholders in political life. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, a number of initiatives have been taken within political parties, including rallies of men determined to put an end to sexism and sexual harassment, notably in Sweden and Iceland.

- **Actively involving men**

Men are a key component of the solutions to be deployed, and they have a duty to actively take part in the debate and to make the elimination of sexism and discrimination in politics an issue and a commitment of prime concern to them. They must unequivocally promote zero tolerance of violence and assume their responsibilities alongside women.

This study included an online platform, seeking witnesses among men in the parliaments of European States, who were invited to make statements on what they may have seen, heard and observed of abusive conduct and violence against their female parliamentarian and parliamentary staff colleagues. They were also invited to actively participate in efforts to find solutions to put an end to sexist acts and violence that undermine the inclusive working environment in parliament and the role expected of the institution to embody gender equality and the highest democratic standards. However, only a dozen or so male parliamentarians and parliamentary staff members responded to the call. One might wonder whether the low number of male participants is due to a lack of interest in the study's subject on their part or because the online platform was not well-known to them or was not in the best format to get male parliamentarians and parliamentary staff involved. The situation needs to be assessed and further discussion and dialogue with men in parliaments is required in order to be able to count on their input. Those who did

fill in the questionnaire suggested relevant avenues for solutions that should be highlighted and explored in depth, pointing out that men must: be made aware so that they are vigilant as regards abusive behavior towards their female colleagues; react immediately; support victims; speak out in the media against this behavior; speak to or report colleagues who transgress; break their silence and set an example of irreproachable conduct.

- **Encouraging equal representation for women and men in parliaments and solidarity between female parliamentarians**

Equal representation for women and men in parliaments and solidarity between female parliamentarians is also a means of changing mentalities and transforming political culture. Over **90 per cent** of the female parliamentarians surveyed thought that having more women active in parliament provided a means of changing the atmosphere at work, gradually modifying the conduct and mindset of male colleagues and ensuring that women are able to fulfil their mandate and serve their electors freely and safely. However, gender parity within political institutions alone is not a guarantee against intimidation and sexual harassment.

Strengthening solidarity between women in parliaments is also an essential response. One study participant said: "Women must unite and back one another up, be more aware of their rights and join forces to ensure that those rights are respected".

The study also demonstrated that networks of female parliamentarians could be areas where women can confide and find solutions but also mobilize and call on the parliamentary institution to no longer tolerate abuse.

*"A female parliamentarian was hit by a male colleague with a bottle. She fell over and was injured. The parliamentary ethics committee did not want to do anything about the incident but there was an outcry within the caucus of female parliamentarians and the culprit was ultimately suspended from parliament for three days."*

While stressing that the onus should not be on women to resolve problems of harassment and violence, many participants recommended that women be given training in verbal and physical self-defence to equip them to respond to sexist acts. It is important, especially at the beginning of their term in office, as they enter the political arena without knowing the prevailing codes, for women to be able to react when they are subject to sexist verbal attacks, to learn not to fall silent and also to know how to respond to threats and remarks on social networks.

- **Building media awareness and focusing on education from the earliest age**

It is necessary to work with and raise the awareness of the media, which have the power to promote a violence-free culture and principles of respect but, as the study shows, still perpetuate harmful stereotypes of women in politics.

Education as a means of changing mentalities and mores, combating discrimination and instilling a culture of equality and tolerance was also advocated by a number of respondents. Civic education and education for citizenship, emphasizing respect for others, for differences and for different opinions and also gender equality, instilled in both boys and girls from the earliest age, will help to establish non-violent and respectful relations in all walks of life.

## Conclusion

The survey's findings are based on interviews of a limited sample of female parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in Europe. Even so, the data gathered and analyzed in the report clearly show that sexism, abuses of power and violence against women in parliaments exist in all the Council of Europe's member States and demand attention and action from parliaments and other stakeholders.

On the basis of these findings and drawing on the good practices identified in the report, parliaments and parliamentarians are urged to take action on these issues, including within their own institution and place of work. They are called on to recognize harassment and gender-based violence for what they are – namely violations of fundamental rights – and no longer tolerate them as "all part and parcel of politics". The study provides them with a sound basis for supporting and applying tangible and targeted measures to create the conditions needed to be able to speak openly, put an end to the culture of silence and impunity and foster and maintain an open, inclusive, safe and respectful parliamentary environment.

The IPU and the PACE will continue to monitor developments and support parliaments in their efforts to combat violence against women. They ask national parliaments to carry out their own studies in this area, debate these issues and step up their endeavours to prevent and combat violence against women in politics and in general. By taking a leading role in preventing and combating gender-based violence, parliaments can have a positive impact on society, actively promote a culture of gender equality and help to bring about a lasting change in mentalities and behaviors.

# Glossary

**Violence against women** : all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life; (Istanbul Convention, art. 3 a: [www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e](http://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e))

**The term “gender”** shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men. (Istanbul Convention, art. 3 c: [www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e](http://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e))

**Gender-based violence:** Acts of physical, mental or social abuse (including sexual violence) that is attempted or threatened, with some type of force (such as violence, threats, coercion, manipulation, deception, cultural expectations, weapons or economic circumstances) and is directed against a person because of his or her gender roles and expectations in a society or culture. (*Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management, UN Women*, [www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/347-glossaire-des-termes-tires-essentials-de-la-programmation-et-de-suivi-et-sections-devaluation.html](http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/347-glossaire-des-termes-tires-essentials-de-la-programmation-et-de-suivi-et-sections-devaluation.html))

# End notes

- 1 [www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians](http://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians)
- 2 More than 81.8 per cent of the female MPs interviewed said that they had been subjected to one form of psychological violence or another. In all, 44.4 per cent said that they had received threats of rape, beatings, abduction or death and 65 per cent had had to suffer humiliating sexist remarks about their appearance, marital status or private life, the social role expected of women or their sexual morality. The frequency of other forms of violence is also extremely worrying, as some 20 per cent said that they had been subjected to sexual harassment and 25.5 per cent to physical violence.
- 3 Female MPs and members of the parliamentary staff in all 47 Council of Europe member States were invited to take part in the study but no representatives from Malta and the Slovak Republic participated.
- 4 To collect data comparable with those obtained in the first global study, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, conducted by the IPU in 2016, this first regional study, focusing on Europe, mostly used the same survey methods and questionnaires as in the global study. However, the questionnaire for the interviews was slightly adapted for female parliamentary staff, a group that was not part of the first IPU survey.
- 5 These data were collected through an online questionnaire that members of the Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments (ASGP) of the 47 European countries were asked to complete between 25 June and 6 July 2018.
- 6 The following are the parliaments that replied to the questionnaire or otherwise provided information to the IPU and PACE on whether or not there were any internal policies against sexism, harassment and gender-based violence: Austria (Lower House), Belgium (Senate), Finland, France, Georgia, Germany (Lower House), Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain (Senate), Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the European Parliament.
- 7 Nor does the study attempt to relate violence against women in parliaments in Europe to violence against women in European societies in general, or to compare women's experience in parliaments with that of women in other workplaces or in professions or occupations that were, until recently, exclusively or predominantly male.
- 8 [www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/search-on-treaties/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e](http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/search-on-treaties/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e)
- 9 PACE, The role of national parliaments and the Parliamentary Assembly in monitoring the implementation of the Council of Europe *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* (CETS No. 210), report of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, 2015.
- 10 For further information on the Convention and the state of signatures and ratifications, see: [www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210](http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210)
- 11 See endnote 1
- 12 On the question of online violence against women, see the report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women *Online and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilitated violence against women from a human rights perspective*, June 2018: [www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23235&LangID=E](http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23235&LangID=E) and the research carried out by Amnesty International, November 2017: [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women)
- 13 Jo Cox was a young UK politician, Member of the House of Commons from 2015 to 2016. She was fatally shot and stabbed on 16 June 2016 for her stance on the war in Syria and for campaigning to keep the United Kingdom in the European Union.
- 14 The term "assistant" refers here to persons who are directly employed by an MP or a political group. This group of people working in the parliamentary world is not represented in this survey because invitations to take part in the study and the interviews were given largely during meetings of the IPU and PACE in Geneva and Strasbourg, which MPs usually attend without their assistants.

- 15 For example, the United Kingdom Cross-Party Working Group on Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy, a study of 1,377 people working in the Palace of Westminster, found that 45 per cent of the women interviewed had experienced non-sexual harassment in the previous 12 months (report published in February 2018), and the Finnish Radio YLE survey of 223 employees and assistants working in the Finnish Parliament which found that 13 per cent of respondents (all but one of whom were women) had been victims of sexual harassment (cited in *Bullying and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces, and in the political life in the EU*, European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2018).
- 16 Press release from *L'Assemblée nationale fait en sorte que les personnes qui s'estiment victimes de harcèlement ou d'agressions puissent obtenir l'aide à laquelle elles ont droit*, François de Rugy, Paris, 20 October 2017.
- 17 *Bullying and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces, and in political life in the EU*, European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2018, p.40.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 *Ending violence and harassment against women and men in the world of work*, International Labour Office (BIT). ILC. 107/N/1, 2018, p.30.
- 20 *ECRI General policy recommendation no. 15, On combating hate speech*, European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance, Council of Europe (adopted on 8 December 2015) sets out measures for preventing and combating hate speech, <https://rm.coe.int/ecri-general-policy-recommendation-no-15-on-combating-hate-speech/16808b5b01>
- 21 Sveriges Riksdag, Promoting Gender Equality in the Riksdag, Stockholm, 2015.

---

© Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 2018

ISBN: 978-92-9142-725-3

All parts of this publication may be reproduced for personal and non-commercial use on condition that copyright and source indications are also copied and no modifications are made. Please inform the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the usage of the publication content.

This study was made possible thanks to women parliamentarians and women parliamentary staff who volunteered their time to speak about their personal, for some of them, painful experiences. The IPU and PACE are extremely grateful to them for their contribution.

We wish to thank sincerely Brigitte Filion who prepared the study as well as all the parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, and IPU and PACE staff who contributed to its realization.

We would also like to thank Global Affairs Canada and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency for their financial support.