

Summary of the e-Discussion on

# THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON WOMEN IN POLITICS

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## LAUNCHING MESSAGE

### Background

*“COVID-19 is a crisis with a woman’s face... The damage is incalculable and will resound down the decades, into future generations. Now is the time to change course. Women’s equal participation is the game-changer we need.”*

*Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General<sup>1</sup>*

The gender gap in politics remains the largest gender gap across sectors.<sup>2</sup> In 2022, women are still marginalized and unfairly represented at all levels of government globally, making up 36% of local deliberative bodies<sup>3</sup> and 26.1% of national parliaments.<sup>4</sup> Only 8.3% of Heads of Government and 7.2% of Heads of State are women.<sup>5</sup>

Although increased women’s participation in decision-making leads to more inclusive policies and service delivery,<sup>6</sup> achieving parity remains a challenge as persisting barriers hinder women’s equal access and participation in public life, including the lack of financial resources and access to networks, discriminatory laws and institutions, and gender-based violence. At the current rate of progress, the World Economic Forum estimates that gender parity in politics will not be attained before the year 2166.<sup>7</sup>

Disasters and crises often exacerbate existing inequalities, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. While an estimated 80 countries and territories postponed national and local elections, at least 158 held elections despite COVID-19 related concerns and restrictions.<sup>8</sup> In 2020 and 2021, it is estimated that voter turnout declined in 66% of countries.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, civic and democratic spaces have shrunk:<sup>10</sup> 155 countries introduced limitations on the freedom of assembly, which in many cases were supplemented by additional restrictions on civil and political rights; and 60 countries targeted freedom of expression.<sup>11</sup>

Many national parliaments reconfigured or reduced their activities by introducing remote and hybrid plenary sessions, committee meetings, voting, government oversight, and public

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<sup>1</sup> Opening remarks at CSW 65, 15 March 2021. [un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2021-03-15/remarks-opening-of-65th-session-of-csw](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2021-03-15/remarks-opening-of-65th-session-of-csw)

<sup>2</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2021, World Economic Forum. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Women’s representation in local government: A global analysis, UN Women, 2021. [unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/01/womens-representation-in-local-government](https://unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/01/womens-representation-in-local-government)

<sup>4</sup> Average as of 1 February 2022, Global and Regional Averages of Women in National Parliaments, Inter-parliamentary Union. [data.ipu.org/women-averages?month=1&year=2022](https://data.ipu.org/women-averages?month=1&year=2022) (accessed on 4 March 2022)

<sup>5</sup> Average as of 1 March 2022 based on UN Women calculations.

<sup>6</sup> Recommendations of the Council on Gender Equality in Public Life, OECD 2015. [oecd.org/gov/2015-oecd-recommendation-of-the-council-on-gender-equality-in-public-life-9789264252820-en.htm](https://www.oecd.org/gov/2015-oecd-recommendation-of-the-council-on-gender-equality-in-public-life-9789264252820-en.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2021, World Economic Forum. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Data valid as of 1 February 2022. Global Overview of COVID-19: Impact on elections, International IDEA. [idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections](https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections) (accessed on 21 February 2022)

<sup>9</sup> Voter Turnout Database, International IDEA, 2022. [idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout](https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout)

<sup>10</sup> Felix Bethke and Jonas Woff, COVID-19 and shrinking civic spaces: patterns and consequences, 2020. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42597-020-00038-w>

<sup>11</sup> COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker. [icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=&issue=2&date=&type=](https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=&issue=2&date=&type=) (accessed on 21 February 2022)

engagement.<sup>12</sup> While remote arrangements can break down some of the practical barriers to in-person participation for women with domestic care responsibilities and women with disabilities for instance, virtual participation can disadvantage women as it could increase their exposure to domestic violence and reinforce domestic gendered roles and expectations.

Additionally, parliaments with virtual participation may reinforce political power imbalances, favoring those physically present in meetings – more likely to be men – and reducing the visibility and impact of remote participants – more likely to be women. Similarly, restrictions on in-person political campaigning activities can widen the gap between elite and nonelite women candidates, favoring those with existing networks, resources, and name recognition.<sup>13</sup>

Virtual participation and internet use is also associated with increased exposure of online abuse and violence against women in politics, which can discourage women from engaging in public debates and voicing their political opinions and aspirations publicly.<sup>14</sup> Reports in 2020 show that women in politics were targeted by intense online abuse and harassment during their mandate as well as during electoral campaigns and elections.<sup>15</sup>

Although there are many women leaders receiving global praise for their crisis-management performance in the past two years, women in most contexts continue to be largely left out. Women elected officials, women candidates, and women voters are particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and its backsliding effects that further exacerbate inequalities and reinforce barriers.

## **Objective**

This e-Discussion raised awareness and collected experiences, knowledge, and good practices on women’s political participation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as explored how to best mitigate the crisis’ effects on women voters, women candidates, and women elected officials to ensure women’s full and equal political participation at all levels of public decision-making processes.

Representatives of electoral management bodies, politicians, political party leaders and members, civil society and women’s rights activists, practitioners, and researchers were invited to join this e-Discussion from 21 March to 11 April 2022 by answering the below questions. The submissions contributed to the consolidated reply below, augmenting the knowledge base available on the topic.

## **Questions**

1. How did COVID-19 related restrictions affect the turnout of women voters in local and national elections in your country/region? What are the best measures to ensure greater women voters’ turnout in the future?

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<sup>12</sup> World e-Parliament Report, Inter-parliamentary Union, 2020. [ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2021-07/world-e-parliament-report-2020](https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2021-07/world-e-parliament-report-2020)

<sup>13</sup> Women in parliament 2020, Inter-parliamentary Union. [ipu.org/women-in-parliament-2020](https://www.ipu.org/women-in-parliament-2020)

<sup>14</sup> iKNOW Politics e-Discussion Summary on the Online Violence Against Women in Politics, 2020. [iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/summary\\_e-discussion\\_on\\_online\\_vawp.pdf](https://www.iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/summary_e-discussion_on_online_vawp.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Women in parliament 2020, Inter-parliamentary Union. [ipu.org/women-in-parliament-2020](https://www.ipu.org/women-in-parliament-2020)

2. How did COVID-19 related restrictions affect women's ability to run for office and get elected at the local and national levels in your country/region? What can political parties, lawmakers, and governments do to make sure women have equal access to elected positions?
3. What is the gender impact of virtual parliamentary work and participation? Have remote parliamentary arrangements affected your parliament's gender-sensitivity and diversity?
4. Has violence against women in politics, including online harassment and abuse, increased in the last two years in your country/region? If so, please provide details and concrete suggestions to make politics a safe space for women.

## CONTRIBUTORS

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to contribute to this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices, and recommendations. The following participants joined the e-Discussion:

- [Akua Sena Dansua](#), former Ambassador, Former Minister for Tourism, Former Minister for Youth and Sports, Former Minister for Gender and Children's Affairs, Former Member of Parliament, **Ghana**
- [Hana Mahdi Ibrahim](#), Director of *Al-Manahil* Association for the Development of Iraqi Women, **Iraq**
- [Hannah Johnson](#), Senior Gender Adviser at INTER PARES, **Belgium/European Union**
- [Popovici Claudia](#), Parliamentary Advisor, **Romania**
- [Samia Zaouali](#), Gender and Communications Expert, first Tunisian woman to be campaign president, **Tunisia**
- [Sandy Melgar Vilchez](#), Researcher at the National Office of Electoral Processes, **Peru**
- [Sereyleak Sonket](#), Education and Gender Coordinator, the Committee for Free and Fair Elections, **Cambodia**
- [Sonia Palmieri](#), Policy Fellow at the Australian National University, **Australia**
- [Susana Campari](#), President of *Mujer Y Gobierno*, **Argentina**

## SUMMARY

1. **How did COVID-19 related restrictions affect the turnout of women voters in local and national elections in your country/region? What are the best measures to ensure greater women voters' turnout in the future?**

Participants report that elections took place in several countries including **Ghana, Iraq, Peru, and Romania** during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Popovici Claudia](#) writes a lack of gender-disaggregated data on voter turnout, making it impossible to study the participation levels of women voters in particular.

[Akua Sena Dansua](#) shares that in **Ghana**, despite widespread public resistance, a new voter registration system was introduced just as the coronavirus was actively spreading in early 2020.

This could have led to low registration rates among women given that movement was restricted and women were especially burdened with care responsibilities in the early stages of the pandemic. She adds that bans on mass gatherings increased the use of online electoral campaign meetings and activities, which discriminated against voters – primarily women – with no or limited access to the internet and expensive communications tools such as smartphones and computers.

[Hana Mahdi Ibrahim](#) and [Popovici Claudia](#) argue that it is essential to ensure women voters are targeted explicitly during electoral campaigns, especially through awareness-raising campaigns designed for women, to ensure high levels of participation.

**2. How did COVID-19 related restrictions affect women’s ability to run for office and get elected at the local and national levels in your country/region? What can political parties, lawmakers, and governments do to make sure women have equal access to elected positions?**

Participants share that the spread of COVID-19 and related government-imposed restrictions, such as bans on in-person meetings and activities, significantly impacted on the ability of women candidates to lead successful electoral campaigns. [Akua Sena Dansua](#) argues that women candidates lacked resources and access to networks and remote communication tools needed to carry out electoral campaigns in **Ghana**. Although similar limitations were experienced by women candidates in **Romania**, [Popovici Claudia](#) shares that there is no gender-disaggregated data of registered candidates.

In **Iraq**, [Hana Mahdi Ibrahim](#) reports that many women were reluctant to run for office for the first time or for re-election because of health risks. In addition to fearing for their wellbeing and that of their families and supporters, politically, many women worried about the potential repercussions of being accused of endangering the safety of others during in-person meetings by political opponents and opposing tribes, and associated financial liabilities.

[Sandy Melgar Vilchez](#) co-authored a [study](#) published by the National Office of Electoral Processes of **Peru** in December 2021 that looked at women’s political participation in the context of COVID-19. With legislative and presidential elections held in April 2021, the findings show that women faced significant challenges to participate fully and equally in elections, including harassment and lack of political party support.

Using information gathered through interviews with women candidates in the 2021 elections, the report shows that women candidates experienced particular effects in their personal lives, as they had to deal with the illness or passing of family members.

Many women candidates share that they had to prioritize their responsibilities of caring for relatives over their engagements as candidates. This directly affected their interactions inside their political parties or organizations, and their electoral campaigns.

In political parties, personal experiences shared by women candidates show that remote arrangements made it difficult to build and maintain relationships with other party members and the leadership, especially for those who had recently joined their party. Parties’ day-to-day

operations were transformed, and all coordination work was moved online. Respondents report that communicating virtually during the electoral process was neither adequate nor successful.

During electoral campaigns, governments instituted many measures to slow down the spread of the coronavirus, such as social distancing, masks, and restrictions on people's movement. These measures limited the use of face-to-face campaign strategies candidates could use, which pressed candidates to use alternative ways of mobilizing and campaigning online, such as through social media platforms. This exposed women candidates to online abuse and harassment, which affected their experiences as candidates according to the respondents.<sup>16</sup>

Participants argue that governments, political parties, lawmakers, and international organizations can help mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19 on women's access and ability to run for office. [Akua Sena Dansua](#) says that women candidates should be provided with the necessary infrastructure and technical support to carry out their electoral campaigns by their governments, local and international civil society organizations, and the media. This would ensure women candidates have equal opportunities to participate in the electoral process, as is guaranteed in many national constitutions and other national and international legal frameworks.

She adds that the United Nations and other institutions such as iKNOW Politics and International IDEA have a role in supporting the establishment, implementation, and sharing of policies and practices that promote the participation of women candidates.

[Hana Mahdi Ibrahim](#) argues that governments have a responsibility to educate political parties, widely considered as the gatekeepers to elected positions, on gender inequality issues, and encourage and push them to give more participation and leadership opportunities to women within their structures, in addition to nominating more women candidates to winnable positions.

In **Cambodia**, for example, [Sereyleak Sonket](#) reports that 17 political parties, including the ruling Cambodian People's Party, have committed to promoting women's roles within their structures and to place more women in upcoming elections (Commune Council Elections in June 2022 and National Assembly Elections in 2023).

This resulted in a slight increase in the proportion of women candidates for the local Commune Council Elections, reaching 31.5%.<sup>17</sup> [Sereyleak Sonket](#) notes that most political parties nominated more women candidates than the average, ranging from 38% (the FUNCINPEC Party) to 54% (the Cambodian Nationality Party).

Citing the example of the electoral law in **Tunisia**, [Samia Zaouali](#) argues that quotas are essential in countering adverse effects the pandemic might create on the participation of women candidates. Although there have been no elections since the coronavirus in Tunisia, she shares that the requirement for political parties to alternate between men and women on candidate

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<sup>16</sup> More on this subject in Question 4 below.

<sup>17</sup> According to the primary result of political party registration and list of candidates released by the National Election Committee on 7 March 2022 from 17 political parties for CCE 2022.

lists is a good practice that always ensures balanced gender representation on the ballots, even in times of crises.

### 3. What is the gender impact of virtual parliamentary work and participation? Have remote parliamentary arrangements affected your parliament's gender-sensitivity and diversity?

[Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated, like nothing before, the implementation of remote working arrangements by parliaments. These include digital innovations such as voting applications and cloud storage of information management systems, which had previously been seen primarily through a 'risk' lens. Virtual participation and voting had been seen as a working modality open to compromise or subject to claims of illegality and unconstitutionality.

For most parliaments, remote working arrangements were far from well established, if not rejected outright, they report. This is despite of previous arguments on the value of flexible working arrangements to attract a more diverse parliamentary workforce, particularly those with caring responsibilities.

When the global community was required to work from home, parliaments could hardly fail to do the same. Research by [Hannah Johnson](#)<sup>18</sup> details the different forms of remote participation across parliaments:

1. Remote plenary sessions were used during the pandemic by many parliaments. Fully remote plenary sessions were implemented by the *Chambre des Représentants* of **Belgium**, the *Saeima* of **Latvia**, the *Seimas* of **Lithuania**, the *Camera Deputaților* of **Romania**, the National Council and *Drzavni Zbor* of **Slovenia**, among others.<sup>19</sup> Hybrid plenary sessions – where some parliamentarians attended in person and others online – were used by the **European Parliament**<sup>20</sup> and **United Kingdom** House of Commons.<sup>21</sup>
2. Remote committee meetings were used by the Senate of **Argentina**, the Parliament of **Australia**, the House of Commons of **Canada**, the *Folketing* of **Denmark**, the Senate of **France**, the Chamber of Deputies of **Italy**, and the Chamber of Deputies of **Mexico**, among others.<sup>22</sup>
3. Remote voting was allowed by parliaments in different circumstances. Some parliaments allowed remote voting for committees, including the *Bundestag* and *Bundesrat* of **Germany** and *Stortinget* of **Norway**. Others only allowed remote voting for MPs isolated due to COVID-19, such as **Croatia's Sabor**. Remote voting was in place

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<sup>18</sup> Johnson, H. (forthcoming) Does virtual participation create more gender-sensitive parliaments? Inter-Pares Issues Brief.

<sup>19</sup> Luigi, E. (2020) [State Of Covid-19 Measures In Parliaments](#), European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation

<sup>20</sup> Welle, K. (2020) 'Protecting Members and staff, ensuring business continuity and implementing practical solidarity', in Robert Shuman Foundation (2020) [The European Parliament in the time of coronavirus](#)

<sup>21</sup> UK Parliament (2020) [House of Commons takes historic first step towards virtual proceedings](#)

<sup>22</sup> IPU (2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#)

- in the **Greece** Parliament, both Chambers in **Poland** and **Spain**. Remote voting is always allowed in **Slovenia's** National Council.<sup>23</sup>
4. Proxy voting – which allows MPs to cast votes on behalf of other MPs who cannot vote in person – was implemented by the **New Zealand** Parliament<sup>24</sup> and the **United Kingdom** House of Commons.<sup>25</sup>
  5. Virtual public engagement increased too, such as live-streamed proceedings in **Argentina**,<sup>26</sup> remote committee evidence-taking in the **United Kingdom** Parliament,<sup>27</sup> virtual tours of the parliament in **Austria**,<sup>28</sup> events in the **European** Parliament,<sup>29</sup> online education, and Youth Parliament sessions in the **Wales** *Senedd*.<sup>30,31</sup>
  6. Remote working for parliamentary staff was required by many parliaments, unless in-person work was explicitly needed. Some parliaments put rotation systems in place to reduce the number of staff in the office, whereas **Slovakia's** *Narodna Rada* only allowed vulnerable staff to work remotely.<sup>32</sup>

[Hana Mahdi Ibrahim](#) shares that the lack of time was a significant challenge for women MPs in **Iraq** as their care responsibilities increased as the virus spread, which negatively impacted the gender sensitivity of parliamentary debates and decisions. [Samia Zaouali](#) echoes this observation, reporting that women parliamentarians in **Tunisia** were forced to prioritize and take care of their families, including children, sick family members, and persons with disabilities, as schools, universities, and offices shut down. Lockdown measures were followed by a rise in domestic violence against Tunisian women, which recorded a sevenfold increase in the first six months and a tenfold increase later.

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<sup>23</sup> Luigi, E. (2020) [State Of Covid-19 Measures In Parliaments](#), European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation

<sup>24</sup> IPU (2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#)

<sup>25</sup> UK House of Commons Library (2020) [Proxy voting in divisions in the House](#)

<sup>26</sup> IPU (2020) [Country compilation of parliamentary responses to the pandemic](#)

<sup>27</sup> Fowler, B. (2020) [Remote select committee evidence-taking is a Coronavirus change that should be kept](#), Hansard Society

<sup>28</sup> Republic of Austria Parliament, [Virtual tours](#)

<sup>29</sup> Welle, K. (2020) 'Protecting Members and staff, ensuring business continuity and implementing practical solidarity', in Robert Shuman Foundation (2020) [The European Parliament in the time of coronavirus](#)

<sup>30</sup> Senedd Cymru, [Education and Youth Engagement](#)

<sup>31</sup> Senedd Cymru (2021) [Power of your Vote: Mock Election Event](#)

//senedd.wales/senedd-now/senedd-blog/power-of-your-vote-mock-election-event/" [Power of your Vote: Mock Election Event](#)

ments.pdf" [State Of Covid-19 Measures In Parliaments](#), European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation



In their research,<sup>33</sup> [Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#) discovered several conceptual and methodological challenges in understanding the relationship between remote working arrangements and parliaments' gender sensitivity and diversity:

- **Monitoring and reporting on diversity data**

Measuring the gender impact of virtual and remote working arrangements is tricky in the absence of data, as is the case for **Romania's** parliament, deplores [Popovici Claudia](#). [Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#) report that most parliaments did not disaggregate participation data by diversity indicators (gender, geography, ethnicity, disability). The **United Kingdom's** House of Commons and House of Lords are rare exceptions.<sup>34</sup> It is unclear – on a global scale – whether marginalized groups such as women, those with a disability, or caring responsibilities were more likely to participate remotely. An intersectional approach to data collection is required, they argue. Aggregating all women, for example, is unlikely to explain why some women could participate remotely for long periods while others could not.

- **Reasons for remote participation**

[Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#) admit that because the pandemic instigated parliaments' implementation of remote participation, it is hard to know whether those who used it did so because they preferred to work remotely or were forced to. Internal border closures – that is, between provinces/regions/states – meant that some parliamentarians and their staff were forced to participate remotely. In contrast, others were able to attend the parliament in person. There is a need to consider the agency of diverse cohorts of parliamentarians and staff in making decisions about their form of participation.

- **Participation in speaking**

[Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#) also report that remote participation was often more restricted than in-person participation. For example, they share that remote participants were not always allowed to vote in plenaries or make interjections or points of order. Where marginalized cohorts of parliamentarians and staff are already less visible in the parliamentary process, remote participation effectively rendered those people even more invisible. It also privileges active speaking in parliament when the work of a parliamentarian is so much more.

- **Establishing a new hierarchy of presence**

For most parliaments, remote working arrangements complemented in-person attendance in parliament, albeit in reduced numbers, resulting in 'hybrid' arrangements, report [Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#). Thus, while some parliamentarians were able to participate 'as usual,' there were additional technological limitations for those online. This was the case in **Iraq**, as [Hana Mahdi Ibrahim](#) reports that many women MPs could not fully participate through remote

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<sup>33</sup> Johnson, H. (forthcoming) Does virtual participation create more gender-sensitive parliaments?; Palmieri, S. (forthcoming) 'In the eye of the beholder: Gendered consequences of parliamentary hybridity in Australia', paper to be delivered to the Workshop on Gender and COVID, Banff, Canada, 12-13 May 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Uberoi, E. (2020) [Coronavirus: MPs' use of virtual participation and proxy voting by gender](#), House of Commons Library, Brown, T. (2020) [House of Lords: Virtual sittings, participation and Covid-19](#)

channels because they lacked reliable internet. Possibly, the two-tiered system of in-person and remote participation had a different impact on diverse cohorts of parliamentarians and staff, explain [Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#).

Citing recommendations of a report by the Australian Human Rights Commission on the safety of parliamentary workplaces, [Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#) share the following guiding principles as recommendations for parliaments interested in designing new rules for remote working arrangements:

- **Predictability:** While there is a need for political spontaneity in the chamber, MPs and parliamentary staff require more certainty in their work schedules so that they can meet commitments outside of work, including caring responsibilities.
- **Agency:** People should be entitled and empowered to choose working arrangements that best suit their personal circumstances.
- **Flexibility:** Where possible, people should have the opportunity to work flexibly, including through remote work.
- **Effectiveness:** Work arrangements, sitting hours and patterns, and chamber processes should support effective work at an individual level, as well as the effective delivery of the business of government.
- **Compassionate leadership:** Leaders should model compassionate leadership and be empowered to support their employees or party members in balancing work with other commitments.<sup>35</sup>

Virtual participation should not be seen as a replacement for existing practice but as an additional option available to those who need it, add [Hannah Johnson](#) and [Sonia Palmieri](#). They conclude that the priority should be to ensure that both methods of participation are equally valued and respected.

**4. Has violence against women in politics, including online harassment and abuse, increased in the last two years in your country/region? If so, please provide details and concrete suggestions to make politics a safe space for women.**

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) isolates women in politics and discourages them from engaging in public life, argues [Sereyleak Sonket](#). The full and equal participation of women in all public spaces is essential for achieving democracy and inclusive societies, and harassment, abuse, and defamation against women hinders their participation in political life, argues [Popovici Claudia](#).

The road for women to become political party leaders and elected representatives is exceptionally challenging, says [Sereyleak Sonket](#). Women who hold or seek public leadership positions are often criticized for their physical appearance, character, morality, or their

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<sup>35</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) [Set the Standard: Report of the Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces](#). Canberra, p. 270.

nonconformity with traditional gender roles and norms, says [Popovici Claudia](#). She adds that attacks are rarely focused on women in politics' abilities or professional experience.

In the COVID-19 context in **Argentina**, VAWP increased with social media, which often grants anonymity to perpetrators and allows harassment without consequences, reports [Susana Campari](#). Although to varying degrees, women in all Argentinian political parties experience VAWP, she says.

Similarly, in **Ghana**, there are daily reports of abuse against women in public life, including jokes and insults targeting women candidates in the 2020 elections, shares [Akua Sena Dansua](#). VAWP is a significant challenge for women in politics as it often demoralizes them and diminishes their voices. According to [Akua Sena Dansua](#), it is essential to name and shame perpetrators and to push for legal reforms that would allow for safe reporting and efficient sentences.

A 2020 survey by the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in **Cambodia** found that 71% of respondents experienced VAWP, mentions [Sereyleak Sonket](#). The study shows that women in politics – including members of the ruling party, opposition party, and other parties – experience multiple types of violence. It was found that women commune councillors experienced more abusive and direct violence than women parliamentarians. Furthermore, acts of violence against women commune councillors and women MPs of the opposition party were found to be more 'obvious, dreadful, and frequent' than those against women of the ruling party or other small parties.

According to the survey results, the most common forms of VAWP experienced by women political activists, commune councillors, and National Assembly members in **Cambodia** are threats and psychological violence. About 82% of respondents declared having received threats, and 71% said to have been subject to psychological violence. About 35% experienced physical abuse, and 8% were sexually harassed. These figures are unacceptable, says [Sereyleak Sonket](#), adding that VAWP is the main obstacle to achieving full and equal political participation for Cambodian women.

She argues that the existing gender gaps in policies and election laws, operations, and investments have created and maintained gender inequality in political representation and participation. The political will to change the status quo along with gender-responsive policies and measures are essential to make politics a safe space for women and enable gender parity at all levels of decision-making. In the Cambodian context, [Sereyleak Sonket](#) recommends the following measures to be taken by political parties, electoral management bodies, parliaments, governments, and civil society:

- **Political parties**
  - Create a safe and enabling environment within the party for women by introducing a gender equality policy, a code of conduct, and having staff dedicated to VAWP, among other initiatives.
  - Allow women to file complaints safely and penalize perpetrators.
  - Enable the inclusion of more women party members in decision-making bodies, such as nomination and parliamentary committees.

- Collect and publish data on women's participation and representation within the party structures.
- ***Electoral Management Bodies***
  - Implement gender-responsive election procedures and regulations, such as quotas on candidate lists, to provide equal opportunities for women candidates.
- ***Parliaments***
  - Pass gender-responsive electoral laws to promote gender equality through affirmative action and provide opportunities for women's equal participation in elections and politics.
- ***Governments***
  - Establish an independent observation body that monitors and provides regular public reports on VAWP.
  - Provide technical and financial support to women in politics to facilitate their work.
  - Respect, enforce, and protect women's rights as guaranteed by international instruments such as CEDAW and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- ***Civil society***
  - Provide training, mentoring, and other initiatives to support and empower women in politics.
  - Conduct research and host debates and discussions on VAWP and women's political empowerment.
  - Raise awareness and educate the public about gender equality and democratic values, focusing on the importance of women's political participation and leadership.