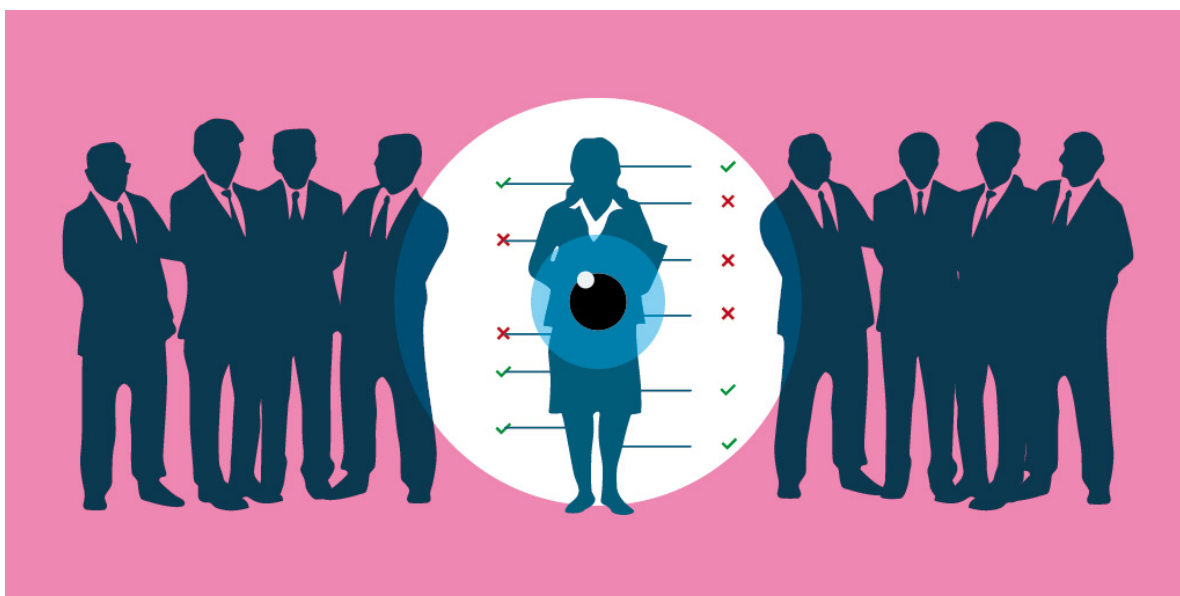


# Gender-based violence in women's political lives and the public sphere

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Illustrator: [Eduardo Luzzatti](#)

The United Nations defines violence against women in political life as “any act of gender-based violence, or threat thereof, that is likely to cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in political life solely because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately” [1] [2]. It should be understood as a continuum that includes sexist comments and behaviour carried out with the intention or effect of humiliating or degrading, sexual harassment and aggression, psychological violence, physical violence, and symbolic violence (for example, the reification of women) [3].

There are two key aspects that distinguish this political violence against women from the violence that men may also suffer [4]. Firstly, the attacks are gender-motivated; in other words, women are attacked because they are women, with the aim of preserving male domination. Secondly, these attacks take on specific forms based on patterns of masculinity and femininity, such as sexist insults, reification and threats of rape [5]. Violence against women in politics is, therefore, a mechanism of control over the access to and permanence in spaces of participation and representation, and ultimately, power. When it occurs in parliaments or other political institutions, this form of gender violence undermines the

legitimacy of the institution and attacks the foundations of democracy.

## The magnitude and impact of gender-based violence in politics

The Inter-Parliamentary Union has recently analysed the magnitude of gender violence that takes place in parliaments [6]. 85.2% of female MPs have suffered psychological violence, 24.7% have been assaulted, 6.2% have suffered sexual aggression during their term of office, and 14.5% have suffered physical violence. In the case of female employees, 40.5% have suffered sexual violence perpetrated by both MPs and fellow parliamentary staff. If we add comments with a sexual connotation, we find that one out of every two female employees has been sexually harassed at work. More than half have also received sexist comments, mostly from members of parliament. As for physical violence, 7.1% of the people interviewed have suffered it while at work. When gender intersects with race, age or non-normative sexual orientation or gender identity, the violence against women in political life is intensified.

With regard to social networks, a recent study from the United Kingdom shows that 86% of the tweets containing hate messages are directed at female MPs [7]. When gender intersects with other identity markers, such as the conflation of being a woman and sexual origin or orientation, insults and harassment on social networks multiply. This abuse increases the vulnerability of the communities affected and has a negative impact on their willingness to take part in formal politics.

As a result of this violence, individual feelings of humiliation, powerlessness, sadness, insecurity, and disorientation are generated, with the corresponding consequences on personal health and well-being (anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and insomnia). Political violence against women affects their ability to work on what has been entrusted to them at the ballot box, in public administration or in their different organisations. Violence against women in politics has, therefore, an impact on the collective, because it limits women's rights to political participation, preventing them from contributing, on equal terms, to debates and decisions. All of this can end up causing them to abandon institutional or party-political activity [8].

Violence against women in politics has an impact on the collective, because it limits women's rights to political participation

All public administrations and authorities are under the obligation to understand feminist transformation as a democratic mandate, because gender inequalities and the violence that sustains them are a systemic failure of democracy. Without a joint determination to fight this system of oppression - patriarchy - neither free political participation nor a political representation that is a mirror of the society it seeks to represent can be guaranteed.

## The leadership of Law 17/2020 in Europe

Catalonia boasts pioneering legislation in Europe to combat this type of violence. On 18 December 2020, the Catalanian Parliament approved Law 17/2020, which amends Law 5/2008 on the right of women to a life free of gender-based violence. The law now incorporates, among other amendments, violence against women in politics. This legislative reform implements the recommendations issued over the last decade by the United Nations, the Organisation of American States, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union in various resolutions, declarations, and reports [9].

Law 17/2020 establishes specific mandates for public institutions and administrations. One of these mandates is the incorporation into codes of conduct of the prohibition of any type of gender-based violence, including gender-based or misogynist speech, offensive language towards women, sexual harassment and psychological harassment based on sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The Law also states that the corresponding sanctions should be established and that these sanctions should be more severe when multiple discrimination occurs. All public administrations and institutions should also have a protocol for the prevention and investigation of gender-based violence, which includes penalties for the perpetrators and reparation for the victims. The independence and expertise of the people carrying out the investigation should be guaranteed, and victims should be provided with counselling and support services [10].

Likewise, the staff of public administrations and institutions, along with elected and appointed officials, should receive mandatory training in gender equality and gender-based violence. To increase social awareness and address the gender gap in data, the law also mandates the promotion of research and public debate on violence against women in politics, including its prevalence, gender motivations and impact on both women in politics and women as citizens, the response of public institutions, political parties, the police and the judiciary, and the causes of the low rate of incidents reported. This research should be carried out under an intersectional perspective that pays attention to the diversity of women, including ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability [11].

Within the framework of political parties, Law 17/2020 also establishes certain obligations. There should be an internal equality plan and a protocol for detecting cases of gender-based violence that take place inside or outside the organisation, and for acting in response to such cases. This protocol should be applied to party members and to any person elected or appointed by the party. In this case, it also requires the independence and expertise of the persons carrying out the investigation, ensuring due diligence, adopting the necessary precautionary measures, providing counselling and support services for victims, and implementing the appropriate reparation measures. The party's bylaws should prohibit acts of gender-based violence, and when such acts occur, determine the suspension of membership or expulsion of the perpetrators.

Regarding also political parties, Law 17/2020 includes the mandate to carry out awareness-

raising actions on this issue, aimed at all party activists [12]. The demand for due diligence in public administrations and parties is key to making them exemplary in their actions and a reference for society as a whole. It is about guaranteeing women's rights to social and political participation.

Gender-based violence in the political and public sphere undermines the legitimacy of institutions and attacks the foundations of democracy

The inclusion of gender-based violence in the sphere of political life and the public sphere for women in Catalanian legislation is, therefore, a step forward that places Catalonia as a European benchmark in the acknowledgement of violence against women in the political sphere. This acknowledgement and the measures established by law makes progress not only in formal aspects of the representation and political participation of women in the political and public spheres, but also reduces the impact of gender-based violence suffered by women and improves their physical and mental health. It is key progress towards more democratic societies in which women's participation is not conditioned by their gender.

#### REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

- 1 — "Women in politics" includes all women involved in political activities (elected or appointed representatives, candidates, civil servants, advisors, etc.).
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- 3 — See:
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- 7 — Ward, Stephen J.; McLoughlin, Liam (2020). “Turds, Traitors and Tossers: The Abuse of UK MPs via Twitter”, in *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, No. 26, pp. 47–73.
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Tània Verge Mestre is the Minister of Equality and Feminisms of the Catalonia Regional Government. She has a degree in Political Science and Administration from the Pompeu Fabra University, a master's degree in International Cooperation from the Carlos III University of Madrid and a PhD in Political Science from the Complutense University of Madrid. She worked at the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió of the Catalonia Regional Government from 2007 to 2010, and has been a member of its Governing Council from 2018 to 2021. She is a professor of political science at the Pompeu Fabra University, where she has been responsible for equality policies for the 2014-2021 period. Her research has focused on how gender crosses political parties and parliaments, and on the adoption and implementation of equality policies. She has advised several national and international institutions and organisations on equality policies, including the Parliament of Catalonia, the Catalan Ombudsman, the Agency for Quality of the University System of Catalonia (AQU), the European Institute for Gender Equality and the Council of Europe. She was a member of the Electoral Union on the 1 October Catalan referendum. She is an activist of different entities and groups of the feminist movement of Catalonia, including Ca la Dona and #OnSónLesDones. She authored [several articles](#) such as “Political party gender action plans: Pushing gender change forward beyond quotas” (2020) or “Gender, power and privilege in the parliamentary workplace” (2020).