Recognize
Resist
Rise up

Country Report
on Gender-Based Violence against Women Politicians in Ireland

Co-funded by
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#MoreWomen
WOMEN FOR ELECTION

Country Report
on Gender-Based Violence against Women Politicians in Ireland

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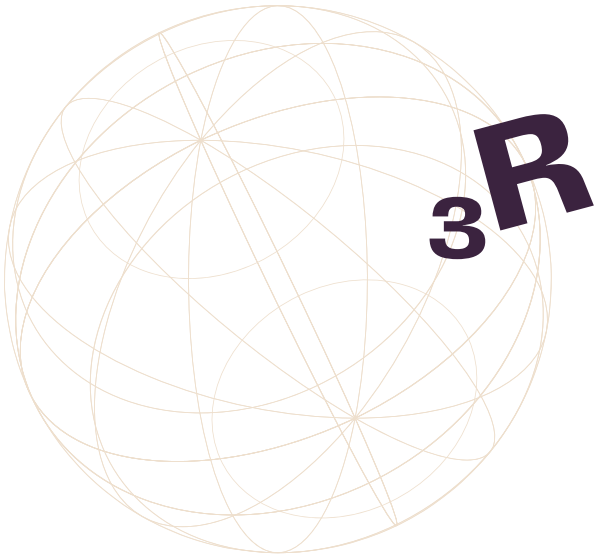
Recognize, Resist, Rise Up: Tackling Gender- -Based Violence against Women in Politics is a comparative study of five European countries, through a partnership of EAF Berlin (Germany), Možnosťvoľby (Slovakia), JÓL-LÉT Alapítvány (Hungary), Fórum 50% (Czechia), and Women for Election (Republic of Ireland). This report presents the constituent case study for the Republic of Ireland, mapping the prevalence of gender-based violence experienced by national-level female parliamentarians. It investigates the experience of various forms of violence, including economic, physical, psychological, sexual, and online. It explores the impact on the professional and personal lives of these women in politics. The aim is to advance our understanding of how political violence is gendered in this national context, and to facilitate comparative analysis across participating countries in the next phase of the project.

Introduction and Context



Women are progressively present in political life worldwide over the past few decades, chiefly due to the provision of equality measures such as gender quotas and women's parliamentary caucuses.[1] Despite these gains significant barriers continue to circumscribe women's political participation. Violence against women in politics (VAWIP) constitutes one such barrier. It remains a serious hurdle to achieving gender equality in politics and tackling the underrepresentation of women in formal political institutions.[2]

The United Nations' Report (2017) defines VAWIP as "any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexualised, psychological harm or suffering, and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionally."[3] This definition of VAWIP includes threats, online abuse, unwanted sexual advances, harassment, resource obstruction, property damage, and sexual or physical assault. While research on political violence suggests that abuse and harassment of politicians is prevalent, there is considerable evidence to affirm that women participating in political life are more likely to experience abuse and harassment and to experience it in gender-specific ways.[4] Bardall, Bjarnegard, and Piscopo (2020) distinguish violence against women in politics from the violence that politicians routinely experience using three discrete, but potentially overlapping, elements. In their conception VAWIP acts are gender-based; in *motive* (with perpetrators prompted by maintaining men's dominance in politics), in *form* (with women's experience shaped by sexist language and/or actions), or in *impact* (with people's understanding, reporting and response to political violence shaped by gender).[5] Gendered political violence thereby, presents a twofold problem: firstly,

1 McGing and Lima, 2023, p.1
2 McGing and Lima, 2023, p.1; Erikson, Håkansson, and Josefsson, 2023, p.896
3 UN Women and UNDP, 2017
4 Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo, 2020; Hakansson, 2024; Doyle, 2023, p. 8
5 Bardall et al, 2020, p. 926;

associated experiences and risk factors for women in politics can parallel that of violence against women more generally, secondly, such acts of violence clearly aim to disrupt political processes.[6]

VAWIP scholars categorise the forms of gender-based violence as *physical*, *psychological*, *sexualised*, and *economic* in nature.[7] Krook (2020) notes an additional form, semiotic violence, which "relates to the use of words and images to harm and subjugate women, typically by making them feel or look incompetent or invisible."[8] These various forms exist along a continuum and can manifest in interrelated ways in online and offline spheres.[9] In this context, studies show that abuse in *online* spaces, especially social media platforms, often assumes a highly gendered character, with women targeted more than men with abusive content, sexist and misogynistic remarks as well as intimidation and threats over longer periods.[10]

The personal and political impacts of VAWIP are wide-ranging. It inflicts harm on the personal integrity of the victim, and can affect women's psychological well-being, physical safety, professional trajectories, and private lives. VAWIP impacts family members and loved ones who are not in political life, who often experience fear and anxiety for the politician's safety and may themselves become targets of threats.[11] Further, gender-based violence interacts with other axes of inequality—such as race, class, sexuality, disability, and age—to produce differentiated experiences of harm. If women cannot take the same risks as men to participate in politics, gendered political violence has serious implications for the functioning of democratic governance because it undermines free and open participation.[12] Incumbent women politicians may decide to leave politics as a result of abuse, while other women may forgo putting themselves forward as candidates for election. VAWIP may also adversely affect the focus on women's substantive interests, as female representatives with a record of defending women's rights and championing feminist issues are subject to more abuse. In this way, gendered political violence poses a potentially serious threat to democracy as well as diverse and inclusive representation.[13] This has a unique resonance in the Republic of Ireland, which has been described as an "unfinished democracy" due to the scarcity of women in politics.[14]

The National Context

The national parliament (*Oireachtas*) in the Republic of Ireland comprises lower (*Dáil Éireann*) and upper (*Seanad Éireann*) houses. The former is directly elected and relatively more powerful than the latter, which is not directly elected. The Dáil comprises 174 members, the Seanad 60 members, with up to 5-year terms in office. Members of Dáil Éireann (Teachtaí Dála - TDs) are elected in multi-seat, geographically delineated, constituencies, using a proportional representation electoral system (*Proportional Representation by Single Transferrable Vote* (PRSTV)). The system facilitates voter choice within party, across party, and for non-party candidates. Electoral competition therefore incorporates candidate, constituency, and party dynamics. Members of Seanad Éireann (Seanadóirí - Senators) accede to the house through three routes. 43 are elected through 5 vocational panels (with an electorate of Dáil members, local authority members, and outgoing Senators). 6 are currently elected through 2 university panels (with electorates of National University of Ireland graduates and Trinity College Dublin graduates). Each panel is multi-seat and utilises the PRSTV system. The final 11 Senators are nominated by the sitting Taoiseach (Prime Minister).

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6 Doyle, 2023, p. 9
7 Bavel, 2022, p. 232
8 Krook, 2020, p. 104; Buckley, Keenan, and Mariani, 2025, p. 342
9 Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2020, p. 745
10 Buckley et al., 2025, p.343; Richardson, 2022; Collignon and Rüdig, 2020
11 Twemlow, Turner and Swaine, 2022.
12 Bardall et al., 2020, p. 928; Buckley et al, 2025, p. 341
13 Håkansson, 2024, pp 83-84.
14 Keenan and McGing, 2022.

Aspects of the PRSTV system have the potential to increase female candidature due to the availability of more opportunities in multi-seat constituencies.[15] However, as Buckley (2025) observes, "Whether it is in local government (**27%**), in the Dáil (**25%**), or at the cabinet table (**20%**), women are significantly outnumbered by men."[16] Explanations of women's under-representation in Irish politics have focused on the continuing influence of traditional cultural attitudes and party candidate-selection procedures as important factors that have stymied women's political opportunities.[17] The Oireachtas' *Women's Participation in Politics* Report (2009), identified the role of five key gendered obstacles to women's participation; Care, Cash, Confidence, Culture and Candidate Selection. One of its central recommendations was the implementation of a party candidate gender quota for parliamentary elections. The legislative introduction of party candidate quotas in Dáil elections (from 2016)[18] engendered fast-track change in women's descriptive representation in Irish political life. The implementation has seen a rise of **10%** in the proportion of seats held by women in Dáil Éireann, from **15%** in 2011 to **25%** in the 2024 election.[19] Civil society organisations and activists are currently mobilising to extend the party candidate quota legislation to all elections.[20] Despite these positive shifts, Ireland trails behind most of its European counterparts in women's parliamentary representation, with concerns that the pace of change is slowing.[21]

Three recent studies highlight the potentially detrimental impact of VAWIP in the Irish context. A study into cyber violence against female politicians, based on 69 current and former Oireachtas and local authority representatives, found that **96%** were subject to abusive messages, hateful content or inappropriate comments online.[22] **73%** had received threats of physical violence and **38%** received threats of sexual violence. The Oireachtas *Report of the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life* (2024) found that women members of the Oireachtas are more likely to experience digital harassment, to be subjected to prejudicial slurs, to be threatened with sexual violence, to be sexually harassed, to receive unwanted sexual approaches, and to receive comments on their appearance.[23] Finally, a study by Buckley, Keenan, and Mariani (2023), based on candidates in local authority (2019) and Dáil (2020) elections, found that female candidates were more frequently targeted, more often subjected to degrading verbal attacks and false rumours, and more likely to experience threats of a sexual nature than male candidates.[24] These experiences were found to have a more negative impact on women candidate's political ambition, who reported a reduced willingness to seek election in the future relative to men. Building on these findings, the present study looks to expand our knowledge and deepen understanding of the prevalence of abuse and harassment faced by female parliamentarians in Ireland. It does this by focusing on female members of the Oireachtas. The next section provides a brief outline of the study's primary research design.

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15 Coakley and Gallagher, 2018, p. 229.
16 Buckley, 2025, p. 1126; The percentage of women in cabinet has increased from three to four (i.e. 27%) in November 2025, see https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/organisation-information/government-ministers/
17 Coakley and Gallagher, 2018, pp. 228-230.
18 Introduced by the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012, parties were required to ensure at least 30% of their candidates were women in 2016 and 2020. From 2023, the requirement increased to 40%.
Any party that fails to meet these thresholds faces a 50% reduction in the annual state funding they receive.
19 Buckley, 2025, p. 1128
20 National Women's Council, 2024
21 McGing, 2024, p.4; Buckley, 2025, p. 1128
22 University of Galway, 2023
23 Oireachtas, 2024
24 Buckley, Keenan, and Mariani, 2023

Methodology

Study Population

The primary analysis in this report is based on an anonymous survey of female parliamentarians. An online questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument on participants' experience of the prevalence and nature of gender-based violence. The questionnaire design encompassed closed and open-ended items. This facilitated respondents to describe their experiences, responses, and recommendations with the safeguard of anonymity. Simultaneously, it facilitated their use of discretion on the extent of detail that they felt comfortable to disclose. The questionnaire was distributed to all 70 female parliamentarians in parliament; Dáil (43) and Seanad (27). Given the small proportion of female parliamentarians, the national mandate of each and tendency of many parliamentarians to sit in each house at some stage in their career, it is appropriate to include female representatives from both houses when assessing the experience of abuse and harassment faced by female parliamentarians in the State. Of the 70 current female parliamentarians, 24 participated in the study, representing a **34%** response rate. A further breakdown of the sample composition is provided at the opening of the results section.

Data Collection

The participant questionnaire was distributed to parliamentarians' Oireachtas email accounts on November 20th, 2025. Participants were given until January 18th, 2026, to complete and submit the questionnaire, with three interval reminders to encourage engagement. The study invite included the questionnaire link, hosted on Google Forms. They were simultaneously advised of receiving a written version of the questionnaire if preferred. The one prospective participant who requested and received a written version, did not subsequently return it.

The questionnaire encompassed the following discrete sections: 1) background variables, 2) economic violence, 3) psychological violence, 4) physical violence, 5) sexualised violence, 6) online violence, and 7) professional and personal impacts and interventions. The selection of questionnaire items is informed by the wider comparative project, ***Recognize, Resist, Rise Up: Tackling Gender-Based Violence against Women in Politics***, of which this country report is a constituent part.

The *background* questionnaire items provide the parliamentary and familial context of participants: political party, age, house of parliament, tenure as political representative, tenure as national political representative, marital status, and guardianship of children. The questionnaire items on each *form of violence* capture; experience, nature and context, and actions taken in response. The final section of items relates to the *professional and personal impact* of experiences, and suggested *interventions*. The impact items indicate, perceived personal and familial safety, professional safety, political behaviour, and political ambition. The questionnaire items on interventions captured participants' perspectives on existing and prospective interventions and supports, with a focus on their perceived adequacy. The use of closed-ended items in the background and impact sections of the questionnaire allowed for succinct responses between options. However, in the main, the questionnaire design facilitated the opportunity for participants to describe their experiences, in their own words, through open-ended items. These items included frequent prompts to provide whatever detail and context that a participant felt comfortable to disclose.

Informed consent

All recipients of the questionnaire received a *participant briefing* to outline the project and the nature of participation. The aims, funding, partnership, and outputs of the project were identified. The nature of the study, the topics involved, and the data collection instrument were outlined to put recipients in a position of informed consent to participate. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, along with correspondence protocol and contact details for the researcher and relevant professional support services if adverse effects emerged during or after participation.

The provision and facilitation of anonymity for participants through data collection, was an important tenet of the research design due to the potentially sensitive topics and experiences in focus. The wording of some questionnaire items was refined from that used in other case studies of the wider comparative project to reflect the use of terminologies in cultural contexts, to approach topics with professional sensitivity. To facilitate voluntary participation, the questionnaire introduction emphasised the voluntary nature of response; the possibility of not responding to any item or items, providing only as much detail as a respondent felt comfortable to disclose, and the freedom to withdraw participation at any point during the questionnaire.

The procedure for collecting, managing, storing, and disposing of the survey data was communicated to prospective participants in the briefing document. This data is stored on a secure project online drive, accessible only to the project research team.

Study Results

Sample Composition

Of the 70 female parliamentarians in the Oireachtas, 24 participated in the study, effecting a response rate of **34%**.[25] Before looking at participants' responses on their experience on violence, this section provides an outline of the sample composition. Specifically in regard to; parliamentary house, length of tenure, partisanship, age, and familial context.

Houses of the Oireachtas

The sample comprises 16 members of Dáil Éireann and 8 members of Seanad Éireann. With 43 female TDs in the Dáil and 27 female Senators in the Seanad, the effects a **37%** response rate for the Dáil and a **30%** response rate for the Seanad.

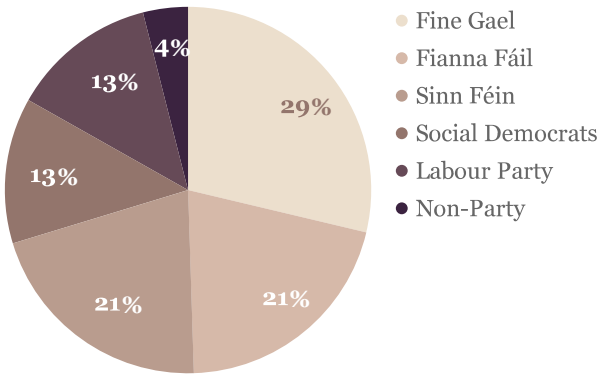
Length of Tenure

The sample consists of 12 first-term Oireachtas members and 12 in their second term or more. With 32 of 70 of female Oireachtas members (**46%**) in their first term in parliament, the sample breakdown here approximates the parliamentary breakdown. Distinguishing by parliamentary house, the sample includes **44%** of first-term TDs (8 of 18) and **29%** of first-term Senators (4 of 14).

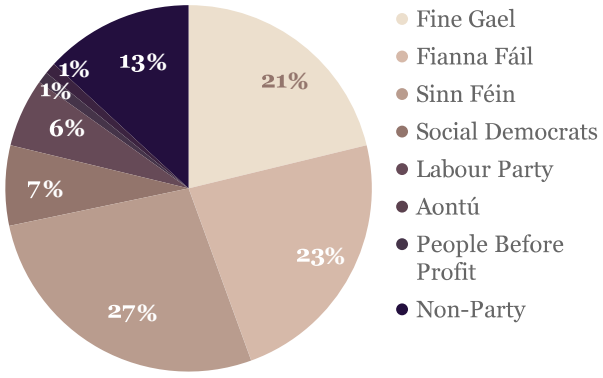
Partisanship

Figure 1: Partisanship in Sample and Oireachtas

Sample Partisanship (%)



Oireachtas Partisanship (%)



Oireachtas members from 5 political parties, along with one non-party Senator, participated in the study. The charts in Figure 1 present the breakdown by party group in the sample (left-hand), and in the Oireachtas (right-hand). The study includes respondents from the five largest parties in the Oireachtas. The sample breakdown by party grouping is: Fine Gael (**29%**), Fianna Fáil (**21%**), Sinn Féin (**21%**), Social Democrats (**13%**), Labour Party (**13%**), and Non-Party (**4%**).

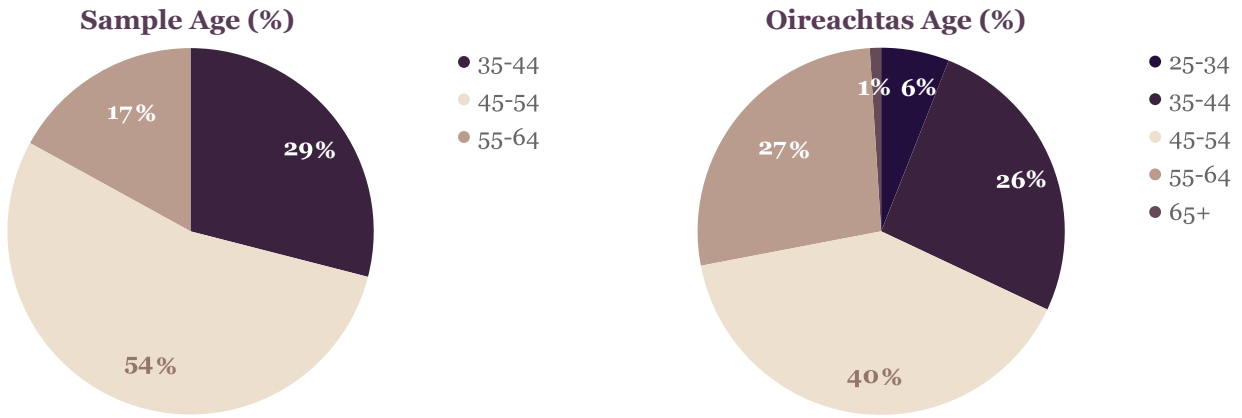
The right-hand chart, with the breakdown of female Oireachtas members by party grouping, provides context on the sample breakdown. The distribution of female members in the Oireachtas is: Fine Gael (**21%**), Fianna Fáil (**23%**), Sinn Féin (**27%**), Social Democrats (**7%**), Labour Party (**6%**), Aontú (<**1%**), People Before

25 While 71 female parliamentarians were elected to the Dáil (2024) and Seanad (2025), Catherine Connolly was elected to the Office of President of Ireland (October 2025), thereby vacating her Dáil seat.

Profit (<**1%**), and Non-Party (**13%**). Comparing the sample and parliamentary breakdowns, Fine Gael, Social Democrats, and Labour Party are slightly over-represented in the sample. Sinn Féin and Non-Party are somewhat under-represented, while smaller parties with a single female parliamentarian (Aontu and People Before Profit) are not represented in the sample. However, the differentials are modest in size.

Age

Figure 2: Age in Sample and Oireachtas



To facilitate anonymity, respondents were not asked to indicate their specific age. They were presented with an item based on age-group, with intervals: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, and 65+. The pie charts in Figure 2, present the breakdown by age group in the sample (left-hand) and the Oireachtas (right-hand). The sample has no respondent from the lower two age groups (i.e., under 35) or from the upper age group (i.e., 65+). The distribution of respondents is: 35-44 (**29%**), 45-54 (**54%**) and 55-64 (**17%**). Looking at the right-hand chart, there is a similar bunching of female Oireachtas members in the middle-age groups. There is no female parliamentarian in the lower age group (age 18-24), and there is only one female parliamentarian in the 65+ group. The distribution of female Oireachtas members is: 18-24 (**0%**), 25-34 (**6%**), 35-44 (**26%**), 45-54 (**40%**), 55-64 (**27%**), and 65+ (**1%**).[26] Comparing the sample and parliamentary breakdown by age group, the 45-54 age group is somewhat over-represented in the sample. Conversely, the 25-34 and 55-64 age groups are somewhat under-represented, albeit the differentials are small-moderate in size.

Familial Context

Two questionnaire items were used to indicate respondents' familial context, namely: marital situation and legal guardian status. A majority of participants identify as married (**58%**), with a further **13%** identifying as separated. One in four respondents (**25%**) convey as being single. In terms of being legal guardians, **75%** of participants indicated so, with **46%** being the legal guardians of minors. Information on these familial variables are not publicly available for many female Oireachtas members, which negates a sample-population comparison in this regard.

26 The age of 7 female Oireachtas members is based on an approximation of publicly available information, as their exact age has not been disclosed.

Experience of Violence

Female parliamentarians' account of the experience, context, and their reaction in reporting for each type of violence is detailed in this section, with a blend of qualitative and quantitative presentation. As mentioned in the methodology, results are based on participants' self-appraisal of experiences and subjective perceptions. This section opens with an indication of experience across type of violence and reporting levels, before detailing the nuance and context of experiences within each type.

Prominence Across Type

Figure 3: Experience of Violence Across Type

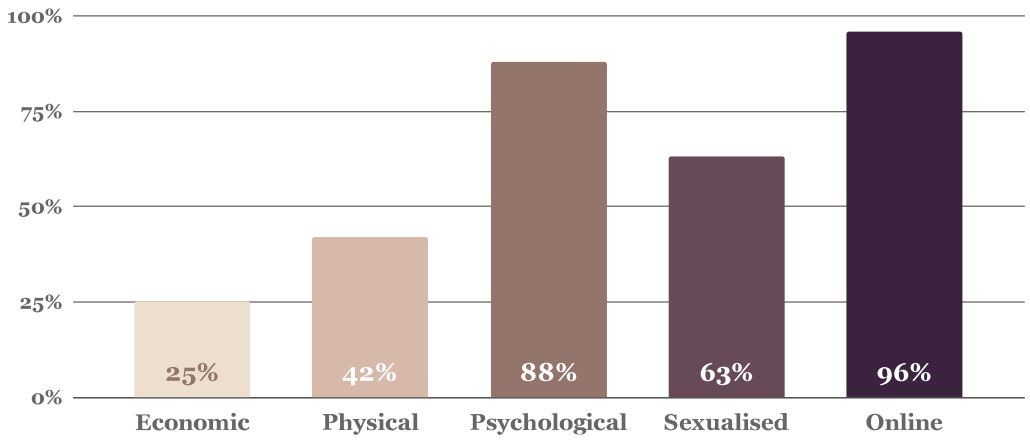
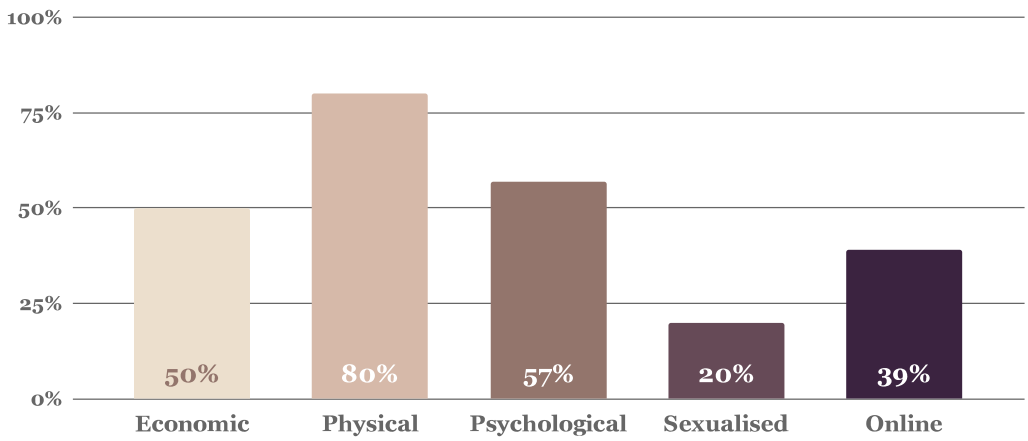


Figure 3 presents a comparison of participants' experience of violence across type.[27] Being almost ubiquitous, **96%** of respondents relayed having experienced *online violence*. Nearly as prevalent, at **88%**, is participant experience of *psychological violence*. Less prominent but still experienced by nearly two-thirds of respondents, is *sexualised violence* (**63%**). A sizeable minority (**42%**) of respondents indicated an experience of *physical violence*. This comprises those who experienced physical violence or were threatened with the use of specific weapons, to align with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018) approach to capturing physical violence. *Economic violence* is the least prevalent type experienced, albeit still indicated by one in four respondents (**25%**). In this macro-level view, it is notable that a substantial majority of female parliamentarians surveyed have experienced four of the five types of violence in focus.

27 Prevalence across type is based on participants responding "yes" to specific questionnaire items within the questionnaire sections on physical, psychological, sexualised, economic, and online violence.

Reporting Across Type

Figure 4: Reporting Across Types of Violence



The reporting of experiences by participants to relevant channels is presented in Figure 4. As evident in the chart, the tendency to report *physical violence* is most prevalent at **80%**. A small majority (**57%**) and half (**50%**) of participants reported their experiences of *psychological* and *economic violence* respectively. While **39%** reported their experience of online violence, only **20%** of those experiencing sexualised violence reported incidents. Further detail on reporting will be outlined in upcoming sections. However, the extent to which incidents and issues go unreported across type is notable.[28]

The detail, context, and conditionality of experiences will be explored in the next section. For each item a breakdown across TDs and Senators is presented for comparative study in the wider project. While moderate percentage differentials in the experience of physical and sexual violence exist across parliamentary houses, they come with a caveat of the study's modest sample size.

Economic Violence

As indicators of economic violence, participants were asked of their experience of the denial of financial, material or other economic materials in the context of their work as a public representative. More specifically, the questionnaire items indicate: the refusal of funding to which eligible, the refusal of parliamentary resources to which eligible, and the damage of personal or parliamentary property. One in four respondents (**25%**) relayed experience of one or other of these indicators.

> **25% of TDs and 25% of Senators in the sample have experienced economic violence.**

Refusal of Resources and Damage to Property

None relayed being denied parliamentary resources or facilities to which they are eligible for parliamentary work. The experience of economic violence predominantly relates to the damage of their personal or parliamentary property. The theft of campaign materials was the most common issue described, with accounts of the vandalising,

28 A breakdown of reporting destination across type of violence is available in Appendix B.

defacing, and theft of signage and posters. Another experience relayed by respondents is damage to constituency offices, such as defacing with paint, and defacing with protest posters.

> **25% of TDs and 25% of Senators in the sample have experienced damage of their personal or parliamentary property.**

Reporting

To capture the extent of reporting, respondents were asked in binary (Yes, No) if they reported the experiences that they identified. If "Yes", they were asked of the destination of their reporting (e.g., to Gardaí, someone within a political party, or someone within parliament). If "No", they were asked to describe or explain how they dealt with the situation. Only **50%** of respondents (3 of 6) who experienced *economic violence* reported the incident to Gardaí. While this is a substantively low level of reporting, it is relatively high when compared to the reporting of other types of violence by participants.

> **25% of TDs and 100% of Senators, who have experienced economic violence, indicate that they have reported it.**

Physical Violence

As a basic indicator of political violence, participants were asked of their experience of physical violence or threats of physical violence (bodily harm, assault, or kidnapping) in the context of their work as a public representative. More specifically, the questionnaire items indicate: the use of physical violence, the threat to use or use of a weapon, and the confinement or curtailment of movement against one's will. A sizeable minority of respondents (**42%**) recounted an experience, or threat of, of physical violence.

> **44% of TDs and 38% of Senators in the sample have experienced physical violence.**

Injure or Harm

Some (**17%**) of participants experienced the threat of physical injury or bodily harm.[29] Respondents, at their discretion, did not provide detail on the nature and context of these threats. This aligns with previous studies conducted in the Republic of Ireland that show that instances of physical abuse are rare.[30] The Oireachtas *Taskforce for Safe Participation in Public Life* (2024) find that **35%** of politicians, with predominantly men in the sample, experienced physical violence as an isolated incident.

> **12% of TDs and 4% of Senators in the sample have experienced the threat of injury or bodily harm.**

Use of a Weapon

When asked about the threat or use of violence featuring a weapon, **33%** of participants had experienced threats of this nature. The range of weapons cited in these threats include: a gun (1), a guillotine (1), and a rope (1). In the latter instance, the respondent [*Participant O*] detailed that perpetrators had "threatened to kill me, told

29 This percentage does not include verbal threats of physical harm or threats of harm assisted by digital technologies; these are detailed on pages 15 to 16.

30 Buckley et al, 2025, p. 348.

me they had a rope for around my neck…". Interestingly, other participants took the opportunity to note that while they no longer engaged with the detail of threatening online content, they believed it quite likely that they receive weapon-related threats of physical harm online.

- **31% of TDs and 38% of Senators in the sample have experienced the threat or use of violence featuring a weapon.**

Confinement or Curtailment of Movement

When asked of physical confinement or curtailment of movement, **8%** of participants recounted an experience of being unable to leave a building or venue. In detailing the circumstances, respondents described unpeaceful protests and intimidation at public meetings with fears of escalation. All experiences of physical confinement or curtailment of movement are from TDs.

- **8% of TDs and 0% of Senators in the sample have experienced physical confinement or curtailment of movement.**

Reporting

Participants were presented with a binary option, along with a request for detail, destination and context, of reporting of incidents experienced. Being the type of violence most likely to be reported by those who experienced it, **80%** of participants reported that experience or incident to Gardaí or party staff. Severe instances, where a respondent was threatened with gun, were reported to the Gardaí. Where respondents clarified that physical violence was threatened but not used, including being unable to leave a building out of fear, the reporting was to senior party staff rather than Gardaí. Strikingly, the respondent who indicated that she was threatened with a guillotine, indicated that she ignored the threat and did not report.

- **71% of TDs and 100% of Senators in the sample reported their experience of physical violence.**

Psychological Violence

In respect of psychological violence, participants were asked of their experience of acts, in the context of their work as a public representative, which caused them psychological harm, including threats, degrading language, verbal insult or harassment. The questionnaire items specifically indicate; sexist or sexual overtone remarks, demeaning or sexual overtones in print or broadcast material, harassment or frightening interactions, or threats targeting oneself or those close to oneself. **88%** of respondents relayed experiencing one or other of these incidents of psychological violence.

- **88% of TDs and 88% of Senators in the sample have experienced psychological violence.**

Sexist Remarks or Remarks with Sexual Overtone

The most common form of psychological violence relayed by female parliamentarians is related to its semiotic form, with a pattern of demeaning sexual comments and a prevailing emphasis on delegitimising female politicians. Nearly four-fifths of respondents (**79%**) have received sexist remarks or remarks with sexual overtone. Such remarks draw on gendered scripts to disparage and deny women's competence in the political sphere. To illustrate: "how would I know what to do as a woman" [*Participant O*], "'time of the month' comments" [*Participant K*] and sexist remarks "when pregnant" [*Participant Q*]. One Senator cited "accusations that

I had 's**ked my way to the Seanad'". Many participants suggested that remarks with a sexual connotation were especially prevalent, both in-person and online, and tend to come with higher frequency during election campaigning. Parliamentarians describe being subject to frequent commentary on their physical appearance, based on what they wear or how they look, and references to female anatomy is a strand for some demeaning comments. Multiple respondents cited remarks which align with the following contributions, "comments on social media about my appearance, especially breasts" and "sexist comments on my physical appearance".

- **75% of TDs and 81% of Senators in the sample have experienced sexist remarks or remarks with a sexual overtone.**

Images on Print or Broadcast Media with Demeaning or Sexual Overtone

Among the indicators of semiotic forms of psychological violence, when asked about their experience of images of themselves in print or broadcast material that had demeaning or sexual overtones, less than a fifth (**17%**) of the sample has experienced same. The majority of these respondents indicated that their experience was of photographic and accompanying written material, which was demeaning, without necessarily having overtly sexual overtones. One respondent highlighted, "Plenty of articles can be demeaning without being overtly intentional... being described as glamourous etc". However, one participant cited a clear case of overt sexual innuendo through the publication of a photo with an accompanying title containing the word "bust" as a pun.

- **13% of TDs and 25% of Senators in the sample have experienced images in print or broadcast material that had demeaning or sexual overtones.**

Harassment or Frightening Persistent Interactions

The experience of harassment or frightening persistent interactions, such as intimidating behaviour or unwelcome attention was also commonplace among respondents (**71%**). Persistent unwanted contact or attention via phone, email and online (social) media is relatively common. References include "online email abuse and harassment" and "inappropriate texts". Some participants have experienced intimidating behaviour at their residence; "someone kept phoning and calling to my door" and "physical presence at my home premises". Worryingly, two respondents referenced being "stalked" during a local election campaign and being "followed and harassed" during an election campaign.

An identifiable theme within harassment or frightening experiences relates to unwanted contact and attention from men. For illustration, respondents relayed, "repeated calls and voicemails [with] men shouting at me"; "males messaging on social media repeatedly", and "unwanted attention from men, with the accompanying comments with sexual overtones".

- **75% of TDs and 63% of Senators in the sample have experienced harassment.**

Threats targeting Oneself or Those Close to You

When asked about the receipt of threats targeting themselves or those close to them (family, friends, staff, campaign team), **71%** of participants have experience of same. These include death threats, threats of rape, or other violence manifested through various mediums. Online media was cited by more than a third (**35%**) as the conduit of such threats. "I've had emails, and online messages, saying that people wish me hanged, or hurt in other ways," with a perpetrator specifying "how much enjoyment ... [they] will take in seeing me die a painful death" [*Participant W*]. There is also descriptions of threats in person, some experienced at a parliamentarian's residence; one participant recounted the perpetrator "had their foot in front door" while verbally threatening physical harm.

Immediate family members are a common reference of such threats. For example: respondents reported receiving threats targeting "my elderly mother" and a family member with an intellectual disability, and threats

to "destroy my brother's business". The children of female parliamentarians are also being used as the reference point for threats. For example, one respondent stated, "people have threatened me directly and referenced my daughter" and another respondent relayed "my adult children were threatened". Threats to staff were less common, though many participants indicated that they and their campaign team were subject to "intimidating behaviour" and threats while canvassing.

A final identifiable strand in threats outlined in response to this item involve threats of sexual violence, received across settings by **13%** of participants. For illustration one participant was "threatened with rape after putting up a poster for a public meeting". Another relayed being subject to "threats of sexual violence…" online and "…on doorsteps during election campaigning".

69% of TDs and 75% of Senators in the sample have experienced threats targeting them or those close to them.

Reporting

On the reporting of these incidents, over half (**57%**) of respondents who cited an instance of psychological violence, reported the incident to Gardaí, or someone within their party or parliament. Death threats and threats of violence to oneself or family members were relatively more likely to be reported to Gardaí. One respondent relayed that she had not made an official complaint but had spoken to the Gardaí informally about threats of sexual violence she received during an election campaign and reported to related social media platform agents. She voiced appreciation for the advice and monitoring support received from the Gardaí and the support of her political party's human resources office. Another respondent described the positive support received from her party regarding unwanted sexist remarks on social media. This indicates that for some female parliamentarians, accessible legal and institutional channels to report abuse and harassment were available, availed of, and yielded benefits.

However, barriers to reporting psychological violence are prominent. A sizable minority (**43%**) of those experiencing it, indicate that they did not report such incidents. The reason for lack of reporting varies from, fear of escalation, time constraints, and the normalisation of abuse. *Participant L* felt that reporting would lead to escalation rather than resolve the issue as the threat to her children was "done with the deliberate attempt to antagonise and gain further attention." Reporting psychological violence can be emotionally taxing as well as time-consuming, costs that many victims cannot afford while managing political responsibilities. One participant, who received threatening emails targeting herself and her daughter, did not initiate the process of reporting due to time constraints; "I intended to send on the emails but never got around to it". The normalising pattern involved respondents choosing to ignore experiences of psychological harm, and to particularly dismiss online abuse or harassment. "I don't bother doing anything with the online stuff except turning comments off and blocking users" [*Participant W*]. Another respondent who had been harassed at a public event, recounted she "just left and tried not to put too much more thought to it" [*Participant I*]. These responses suggest experiences of psychological abuse are often treated as an inevitable part of political life, leading to underreporting.

50% of TDs and 71% of Senators in the sample reported their experience of psychological violence.

Sexualised Violence

Participating parliamentarians, within the context of their work as a public representative, were asked of their experience of sexual acts or attempts of sexual acts by coercion or force, encounters of unwanted sexual comments, innuendo and sexual harassment. Specifically, questionnaire items act as indicators of the experience of sexual harassment (such as remarks, jokes, suggestions, and touching), and the experience of forced encounters of sexual acts. Nearly two-thirds (**63%**) of respondents relayed that they had experienced overlapping forms of sexual harassment that occurred across institutional, civil, and digital spaces.

69% of TDs and 50% of Senators in the sample have experienced a form of sexualised violence

Forced Sexual Acts

No participant relayed an experience of forced sexual acts or sexual assault.

Sexual Harassment

Primarily experiences related to the experience of unwanted touching, and unwelcome sexual comments or advances. Multiple participants gave examples of persistent sexualised boundary violations, including sexualised innuendo and jokes. One participant cited an instance of innuendo on "the fun I must be having in LH [Leinster House – parliament]" due to being "single and unmarried". Other boundary violations related to invasive physical proximity, cases of "unwanted touching", and sexualised abuse, threats and propositions online.

Some participants suggest that, in political and parliamentary life, there is a normalisation of sexualised forms of harassment, often coupled with a male dominated culture. One suggests that sexist language is not always intentional, "some men are very unaware of inappropriate language when used". However, others indicate the intentional and cultivated nature of comments. One participant reflects on a "culture of 'laddish' behaviour with sexist comments…[that]…should simply be seen as unacceptable across the board now". Elsewhere *Participant N* echoes that "it's so normal - it can be subtle reference/unwanted touching/comments on physical appearance". This normalisation leads victims to doubt whether their experiences "count" as violence, discouraging reporting. One participant [*J*] sees a partisan dimension to behaviour, holding that it is more acute among rival political parties, and comes with the express intention to "undermine women at every opportunity."

Reporting

Only one fifth (**20%**) of those who conveyed an experience of sexualised violence, indicated that they have reported the incident to Gardaí, sexual violence support services, or someone within party or parliament. Sexually threatening behaviours, including rape threats, were reported to Gardaí. Given the routine nature of other forms of sexual harassment, including sexualised remarks, unwanted touching, and online harassment, it is evident that female parliamentarians' subjective thresholds for reporting incidents appears relatively high. In the context of pervasive and high abuse that parliamentarians routinely receive online, much sexualised abuse online appears to fall below the threshold of reporting. The following contribution by *Participant W* captures a shared sentiment "there is a large amount of online abuse, some of which is sexual in nature, but I no longer look at it in any detail."

In offline settings, participants tend to have dealt with issues or incidents through informal means. They apply discretion and strategies in their response to incidents. These include "severing engagement" with relevant actors rather than reporting through official channels or reporting an incident if "someone has crossed a line…to feeling threatened or scared". Evidently, female parliamentarians tolerate, or feel they have to tolerate, a level of harassment of a sexual nature. One participant goes on to indicate that she attempts to air the phenomenon, "I speak freely and openly about the comments I get". Another stated that "If I do not agree with a comment or action, I will call it out straight away with the person involved." In general, and notably, the tendency to report incidents to party officials appears negligible. This is understandable in instances where the source of harassment was identified as "Senior members in my party." However, this lack of reporting within

party again speaks to normative and institutional barriers preventing women from reporting acts of sexual harassment. It also indicates a substantively significant under-reporting of the sexual harassment experienced by female politicians.

- **18% of TDs and 25% of Senators in the sample have reported their experience of sexualised violence.**

Online Violence

Abuse, threats, and harassment facilitated and amplified by online technology is the final type of violence captured in the study of female parliamentarians' experience. Questionnaire items relate to the sharing online of demeaning or sexual connotated images, and the receipt of abuse or threatening comments through the public comments, or through private messages through social media.

Abusive, Hateful, or Threatening Comments under Social Media Posts

The vast majority (**96%**) of participants experienced a form of online violence. This primarily related to the receipt of abusive, hateful or threatening comments on their public social media posts. The majority of participants indicate the regularity with which they receive such comments in online spaces: "...it's routine now", "Yes on a regular basis", "Every day since I began my campaign and became an Oireachtas member..." Some detailed the insults, name-calling and degrading language they received on social media. One participant indicated that the forms of abuse she receives online are "too many to describe in detail", ranging from sexist comments about how she gained political office to "being called ignorant, thick, corrupt, biased, stupid, a waste of space, not wanted in Government...". Elsewhere another participant illustrates a range of repeated insults, "things like 'silly c***...greedy pig...waste of space... fat s**g". She also observes that this abuse increased when her policy work was more visible through collaboration with the then Tánaiste (Deputy Head of Government).

- **94% of TDs and 100% of Senators in the sample have experienced online abuse.**

Abusive, Hateful, or Threatening Private Messages on Social Media

On the receipt of private direct messages ("DMs") on social media, **67%** of participants indicated that they received abusive or threatening correspondence. While less frequent than public comments, participants emphasised that these messages were often more "threatening", "personalised", and "can be the most abusive". One participant indicated her belief that the private nature of the online abuse further enabled a sense of impunity on the part of perpetrators.

- **69% of TDs and 63% of Senators in the sample have experienced abuse via online private messaging on social media.**

Images on Social Media and Online Platforms with Demeaning or Sexual Overtone

Just over a third (**38%**) of participants have experience of demeaning or sexually connotated images being published on social media or online platforms. For more than half of those, the image-based abuse was perceived as demeaning rather than explicitly sexually connotated. Specific to social media platforms one participant highlighted that her choice of clothes sees her "mocked" and "consistently misgendered". Another participant was "caricatured" in an online image, and another had a "Swastika" overlaid on their forehead. In reference to parliamentary dynamics, two participating TDs suggested that image-based abuse was used by opposition parties or constituency colleagues to misrepresent or criticise how they voted in parliament, especially on contentious issues.

- **38% of TDs and 25% of Senators in the sample have experienced demeaning or sexually connotated images published on online platforms.**

Gender and Online Violence

Participants' perspectives were sought on the role of gender as a factor in online abuse received on digital platforms. The open-ended nature of the items allowed for subjective interpretation of the various ways in which gender can shape experiences of online violence. A substantial majority (**79%**) think that gender is a relevant factor in abuse received. Several asserted that they are the target of online violence with greater frequency because they are women. Some participants believe that female parliamentarians are seen as "softer" or "easier targets". The majority of respondents pointed to the gendered motives and forms of online violence, while simultaneously acknowledging the prevalence of online targeting of male politicians and a trend toward online violence toward political representatives.

In describing the gendered nature of online abuse, participants reference the misogynistic language, sexist comments and harassment that typify their online experience. *Participant U* notes that "unwanted advances are more towards females I think, whereas the hate seems to be directed at all". A strand of online abuse around "appearance" is evident in responses. Participants describe that such abuse "often refers to my looks, weight, clothes", "things like… 'fat s**g'", and that they "…don't call out men regarding their appearance". Multiple participants spoke to the source of abuse and affirmed a gender element, for example, "…the serious abuse comes from men the vast majority of the time, however, women can also be very cruel" [*Participant P*].

87% of TDs and 63% of Senators in the sample thought that gender was a factor in online abuse.

Reporting

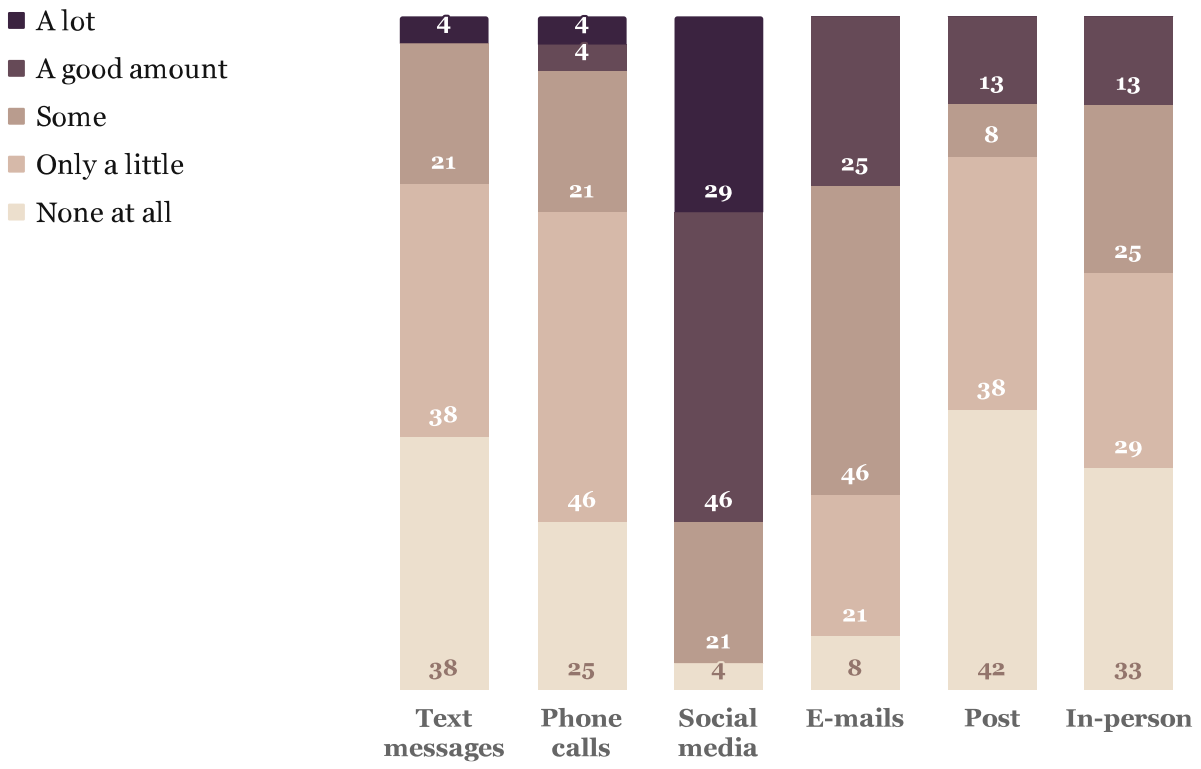
In terms of incident reporting, participants were again asked if they reported incidents to Gardaí, social media regulators, or party or parliamentary officials. Two fifths (**39%**) of respondents relayed that they have reported an incident. With some concurrent reporting of abusive content to multiple channels, **22%** reported to relevant social media platforms; **13%** reported to party or parliamentary officials and **9%** reported to Gardaí. However, the majority of respondents stated that they either "ignore" or "block" the sources of social media abuse. Participants' replies indicate that online abuse is being normalised, with one respondent noting, "it should not be the norm now, but sadly it is." Most respondents indicated that they disassociate or disengage from comments on social media altogether as a tactic to manage the volume of hateful comments that they receive: "I do not read comments too often" [*Participant F*], "I don't engage with social media, if at all possible, I leave it to my team" [*Participant I*] and "I no longer read any comments on social media under my posts as the vast majority are insulting, threatening and/or demeaning" [*Participant P*]. Some doubts are expressed about inclination, capacity, and promptness of social media platforms to resolve abuse reported to them. One respondent indicated that abusive comments she received are "too many to count", with only one incident she reported to a platform being resolved as in breach of platform user policy.

33% of TDs and 50% of Senators in the sample have reported their experience of online violence.

Mediums and Issues

Mediums of Abuse

Figure 5: Mediums of Abuse



Participants were asked to identify the extent to which they receive abusive or threatening comments across various media. Figure 5's stacked columns present participants' response to a closed-ended item based on the options positioned on the horizontal axis. The columns breakdown the response per medium with the response options presented in the right-hand legend. The purpose of the item is to capture female participants perception of each as a medium or environment as a conduit of abuse and threats of violence. It is intended as a complement to the detail and context of previous sections.

As evident through various responses already outlined above, by far the medium through which female Oireachtas members received abusive or threatening comments the most is social media. Three-quarters of respondents (**75%**) indicate here that they receive "A good amount" or "A lot" of abusive or threatening comments through social media[31]. The extent to which social media stands apart from other media and contexts as a conduit of abuse is striking. To this end, while **29%** of participants receive "A lot" of abuse via social media, less than **5%** receive that level of abuse through any other medium. Only one respondent reported receiving no abuse on social media. Given this proclivity, it is axiomatic that when asked about interventions and supports in a later section of the survey, social media is front and centre.

31 "A good amount" in this context refers to substantive size rather than a normative or affective amount.

A quarter of participants (**25%**) receive "A good amount" or "A lot" of abuse via email. An even lower portion of participants received such levels of abuse and threats via postal mail and in-person (**13%**). Meanwhile, only two respondents receive "A good amount" or "A lot" of abuse via phone call, and only one respondent receives that extent via text message. A base observation is that media with greater potential anonymity (such as social media and email) are more potent conduits for abusive and threatening comments than media which are potentially more identifying, such as in person or caller identification. Although this is not absolute given that postal mail, which permits anonymity, is less prominent than in-person as a conduit.

Issues of Abuse

To capture participants' perception of political or policy factors which trigger abuse, they were presented with the following open-ended item: "Have your stances on certain issues or policy areas made you more susceptible than others to harassing, abusive, and sexualised speech or violence?" A majority (**58%**) indicate that their stances on issues makes them more susceptible. An identifiable factor in triggering abuse is female parliamentarians' espousal of feminist stances on issues relating to sex, gender, and women's rights, such as reproductive health and gender-based violence. Other minority rights issues, such as LGBT+ and trans rights, are equally considered as "lightning rod[s]" for abuse.

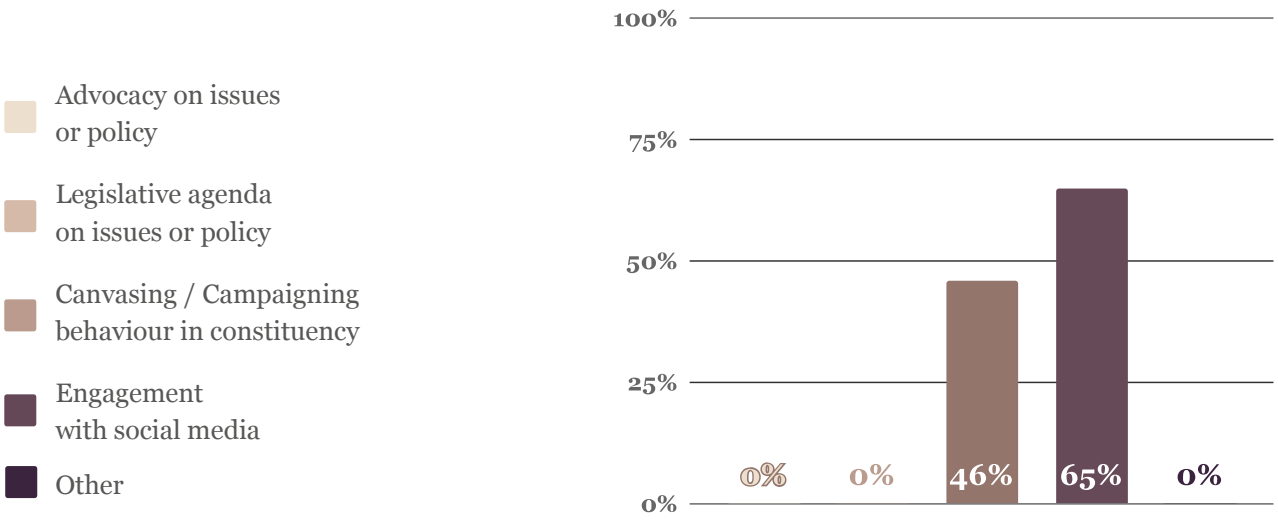
Migration, more specifically a pro-immigration stance, is another factor with threats of harm made in relation to advocacy for international asylum. For example, one participant received "threats of violence on social media in relation to work on IPAS [International Protection Accommodation Services] accommodation centres". Other issues, such as fox hunting, animal welfare, and Gaza were associated with abuse and threats to individual parliamentarians.

Impacts

After their responses on their experience of violence types, participants were asked their perception of the professional and personal impacts of such experiences.

Professional

Figure 6: Professional Impacts



To capture the breadth of impacts, participants were asked to indicate whether their behaviour in each of the following aspects was impacted; advocacy on issues, legislative agenda on issues, canvassing and campaigning in constituency, engagement with social media, and another other self-identified aspect. Figure 6 indicates participant responses across impact, with the possibility of selecting multiple items as relevant. Respondents were also asked to expand on their responses.

Self-censorship and Withdrawal from Online Spaces

Two-thirds of participants (**65%**) indicated that they have changed their engagement with social media. This entails an increasing disengagement from social media content as "it's so toxic", with a trend to increasingly ignore "unsavoury comments". The impression is succinctly captured by *Participant P* in admitting that "I no longer read comments under other posts which mention me… as I wouldn't get out of bed in the morning!".

Some participants express their resolve to engage with people in person rather than online. Indeed, some delegate their social media management of a particular platform almost entirely to staff or have removed their accounts completely.

It is striking that a substantial minority of respondents now avoid commenting or communicating their position online on issues that they perceive as contentious or divisive. Online abuse is having a chilling and inhibiting effect on female parliamentarians voicing of their stances and views on digital platforms.

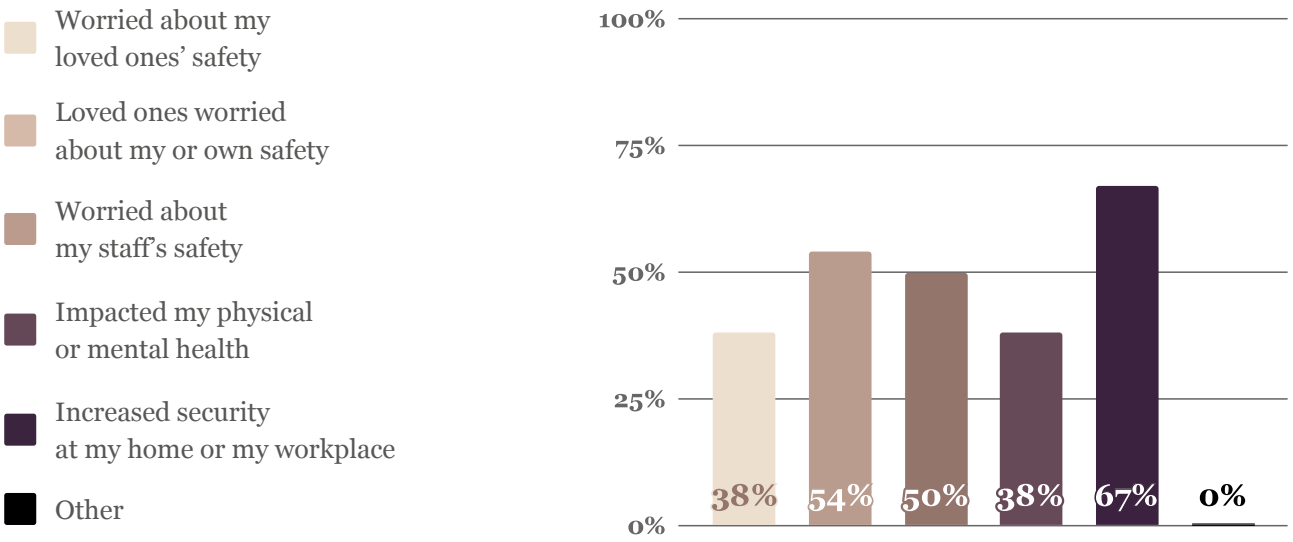
Hypervigilance in Canvassing and Campaigning

Nearly half of those surveyed (**46%**) convey that they have changed canvassing or campaigning in their constituency as a result of their experiences. Avoiding lone canvassing or campaigning is the most cited impact among respondents. Beyond this, hypervigilance even while canvassing with others is a consistently cited impact. This is epitomised by the strategy described by *Participant L*, "I now adhere to a schedule of where I will be when I am out and about alone and also check in with staff when I am back". This hypervigilance has extended

beyond canvassing to inhibiting other community-facing activities. "I'm aware of safety concerns in all external engagements, including canvassing". The impact is felt not only on the range of engagements, but on the nature and scope of engagement at events. *Participant I* details being "increasingly aware of my movements and perhaps not going to certain places, or for example leaving an event earlier than I would like due to harassment." Clear professional implications arise from these impacts regarding female parliamentarians' capacity to compete for political office and to engage with their constituents. Hypervigilance and reduced or altered social and daily activities extend into female parliamentarians' personal lives, such as an inclination to vary daily routines for safety. "It has changed my socialising behaviour. As people are more inclined to approach you negatively when they've had a few drinks, I am less comfortable out in social settings" [*Participant X*]. While this appears personal and social in nature, it too has implications for female parliamentarians' engagement at social events, which is valuable for political representation, mobilisation, and networking.

Personal

Figure 7: Personal Impacts



The personal impact of participant experience was also solicited to capture the breadth of impacts. A range of possible impacts were presented, with respondents asked to select all that apply. These included, worry about personal and loved ones' safety, worry about staff safety, physical or mental health impacts, increased security at home, loved ones' worry about parliamentarians' or their own safety, or another self-identified effect. Half of participants worry about staff safety (**50%**), while **38%** worry about their own and loved one's safety. A greater proportion (**54%**) convey that their family or loved ones' worry for their or own safety. On foot of these fears, it follows that two-thirds (**67%**) have increased security at home or in their workplace. Prospectively, *Participant M* indicated that "When I own my own home, I will certainly be cautious about publicising my address and I would install CCTV for peace of mind". The nexus of fear for oneself or affiliates, along with the perceived need for vigilance and security, increases the pressure and personal burden on female parliamentarians. A sizeable minority (**38%**) of participants feel that their physical and mental health has been negatively impacted by consequence of such experiences.

Political Ambition

Nonetheless, there is a notable professional resilience. The overwhelming majority (**91%**) of female parliamentarians state that they intend to continue their work as public representatives despite, or in spite of, such experiences. The sentiment of many is epitomised by *Participant W*, "It just makes me more resolute that I should continue my work". Other participants, who relayed they would not be deterred from running for election

again, identified precautions and changes to their practice, such as canvassing and security practices, which they consider necessary in order to persist in public office.

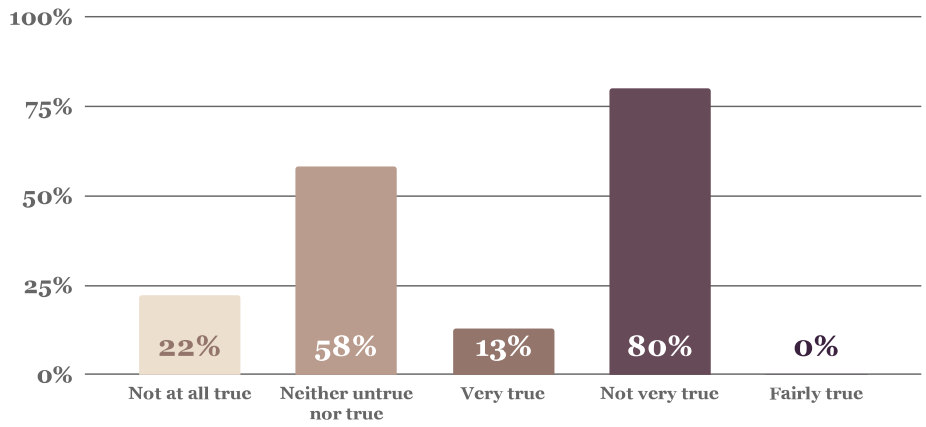
Two participants (both Senators) confirm that their experience has impacted their ambition to run for election again. One has experienced threats of physical violence, the other sexual harassment, with threats targeting loved ones and high levels of online abuse received. Both confirmed that they have reported incidents to Gardaí. However, they explained that their experiences impact their personal and mental wellbeing, as well as limiting their online (social platforms) and offline socialisation, canvassing, and networking.

Interventions

Participants were asked to provide their perception of existing and desired measures to deter, or mitigate the impacts of, abuse toward female parliamentarians. More specifically, the questionnaire items indicated the perceived adequacy of existing tools and mechanisms to detect and prevent harassment, to identify mechanisms that they would like developed to detect and prevent harassment, to identify what supports helped them deal with their experiences, and to identify supports or training that *Women for Election* could offer in this area.

Existing Measures

Figure 8: Adequacy of Existing Measures



Participants were asked to what extent existing mechanisms and tools to detect and prevent harassing, abusive, and sexualised behaviour against female politicians in the ROI are adequate, and responses are presented in Figure 8 above. With only **8%** of respondents considering existing measures adequate, the vast majority (**80%**) consider them inadequate.

Measures Requested for Detecting and Preventing Abuse

In a follow-up item, participants were asked to expand on the mechanisms and tools which they desire around detection and prevention of harassment, abusive, and sexualised remarks or violence against female politicians. A slight majority (**54%**) specify the regulation of social media. Four identifiable themes emerge herein; verifiable identification of users, stronger accountability of providers for platform content, more active moderation of platform content, and more potent response by providers when abusive content is brought to their attention.

Participants indicate a perceived inadequacy of the current situation, emphasising the need for enforcement or implementation of existing legislation on social media users and platform providers. The latter resonates with a view by many respondents that they are currently resigned to a strategy of blocking other users on online platforms. Other measures suggested for improving online spaces for female politicians include a reporting app for abuse and harassment received, and greater education/training of politicians to ensure online safety.

The call for enforcement of existing legislation in online spaces is broadened by many respondents to enforcement of existing legislation to deal with abuse of politicians, female and male, in all settings. Two respondents call for the full implementation of recommendations from the final report of the *Oireachtas Taskforce for Safe Participation in Public Life* (2024). An existing Oireachtas scheme for personal security by parliamentarians was mentioned by one participant, who wanted it extended for greater accessibility by all political representatives.

Relevant Supports

When asked what supports helped them to deal with their own experiences, many participants responses were inward-looking. These participants referred to personal traits such as "strength", "courage", "internal resilience", and "common sense". Interestingly, those who responded with such traits, did not go on to identify a relevant external support factor.

The existence of, and interaction with, a relevant support network was frequently cited. For some the relevant supportive network was non-professional and non-political, with references to family and friends common. Others mention a professional and political network, such as parliamentary peers and staff. Interestingly only two participants specifically mentioned parliamentary party or party staff. One participant mentioned women's political groups and another mentioned women's caucuses as important support networks. In references to networks and groups, their role as a forum to discuss issues and experiences and as a means for reflecting on experiences and considering strategies is the role attributed.

Among participants who mentioned security as a concern in their experience, the presence of responsive and supportive Gardaí is valued. One respondent mentions the Oireachtas scheme to facilitate the upgrade of personal security measures for politicians as being of substantive support.

Role for Women for Election

Participants were also asked to identify what an organisation such as *Women for Election* could provide by way of support or training. Half of respondents identify a specific measure. Among these responses, a variety of suggestions emerge, rather than one prominent suggestion. Three participants would like to see more support and training to boost the confidence of female candidates and female politicians. One suggests that a lack of confidence can impact female parliamentarians' resilience. Four participants would like to see a greater development and facilitation of peer support networks. Facilitating discussions on shared experience, with advice on preventive measures and responses to threats, as two discrete suggestions for aspects to cover in such settings.

Contributions to reset the norm and to regulate interactions with female politicians is another theme in response. For one participant, this involves training male politicians on how they can support female colleagues, for another it involved supporting female parliamentarians to call out the targeting of female opponents by parliamentary party colleagues. In an encompassing contribution, *Participant L* suggests "assistance with developing a response toolkit to include realistic boundary setting and clear lines of action following an event. I have been an elected rep for coming up on 12 years and in my experience, the tolerance bar before reporting or seeking assistance is getting higher when the opposite… should be happening, it should be getting lower for all forms of abuse, harassment and threats of violence".

Unsurprisingly, given its prominence in participants' experiences, a few participants felt that *Women for Election* have a role in lobbying for stronger legislative regulation of social media platforms, and in calling for greater responsiveness by social media platforms in their moderation of content when abuse of female politicians is at issue.

Summary of Findings

The Cost of Online Abuse

The study finds that remote means, such as online and via email, are the more common locations where abuse of Irish female parliamentarians occurs. Existing research affirms that the relative anonymity afforded by online environments reduces accountability and lowers the perceived risk that perpetrators will be identified or caught. As Bjarnegård (2018) notes cyber violence, particularly sexualised forms of harassment assisted by digital technologies, is a highly "efficient" form of gendered political violence. In other words, it causes considerable damage to the victim, while coming at a comparatively low cost to the perpetrator.[32]

Impact of Online Abuse

Online abuse is very prevalent and the impacts on women's political work are manifold. Research suggests that most candidates, women and men, augment physical campaigning and advocacy with a presence on social media, especially to reach younger voters across multiple platforms.[33] Results in this study evidence that online abuse prompts female parliamentarians to self-censor and strategically disengage from social media. Overall, this has the effect of restricting women's visibility, their engagement with constituents, and their participation in political debate.

Reporting of Online Abuse

Reporting of abusive or threatening content online was relatively low, only **22%** stated that they reported abusive content to social media moderators. Furthermore, concern about the inclination or capacity of social media platforms to resolve abuse when reported was widespread among participants. In the absence of efficacious and accessible reporting channels on platforms, two in five participants (**39%**) opt for blocking users or ignoring commentary as their primary method of managing abuse on social media platforms.

Understanding of Online Abuse

This study finds that female parliamentarians are understandably disengaging from the detail and content of online abuse for their wellbeing, yielding to a tendency to dismiss online abuse as "the cost of doing politics."[34] Consequently, it is not possible to fully monitor and understand the nature, extent and severity of forms of violence online, which are increasingly meted out. This is pertinent in cases where online harassment of women politicians can include threats of violence, stalking, doxing, and other abuse that have real-world escalation risks and are linked to broader patterns of harm beyond social media platforms.[35]

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32 Bjarnegård, 2018, p. 692; Bardall et al., 2020, p. 926.
33 McGing and Lima, 2024, p. 2
34 Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2020, p. 745
35 Koch, 2025

The Nature of Sexualised Violence

This study indicates that sexualised forms of violence are among the most prevalent types of political violence experienced by female parliamentarians in the Republic of Ireland, occurring in both offline and online political environments. Participants frequently reported incidents such as sexualised comments about appearance, persistent harassment, and sexist remarks intended to delegitimise their standing as female politicians.

Capturing Experiences

Methodologically, the anonymous nature of the online questionnaire deployed in this study appears to be particularly valuable when researching sensitive issues such as sexualised violence. It provides participants with a greater sense of privacy and protection to disclose challenging personal experiences. Specifically, anonymity produced a dividend for the reporting here of instances of vertical violence—harassment perpetrated by individuals in positions of authority, such as senior party members or more senior political colleagues. In such contexts, power imbalances and professional consequences can discourage formal complaints. Anonymous survey methods therefore create a safer channel through which participants can recount experiences involving powerful actors without fear of identification or sanction, thereby helping capture forms of gendered political violence that are otherwise significantly underreported.[36]

The Nature and Reporting of Psychological Violence

Psychological violence—including threats, degrading or sexualised language and verbal abuse— emerged as a common feature of participants' experiences. While few participants reported physical violence, remote threats of physical violence were highly prevalent. This study's findings indicate that experiences of political violence faced by women are more likely to manifest through sexualised and psychological forms of harm. At the same time, results show that these forms are consistently underreported. This creates a context in which psychological violence is both pervasive and systematically invisible, reinforcing its persistence and undermining accountability.

Hypervigilance

Participants in this study are acutely aware of the potential risks when interacting with voters while canvassing/campaigning, or at other community-facing events. This has led them to adopt precautionary behaviours such as carefully assessing locations, scheduling safety check-ins with staff, and ensuring that they are accompanied by others. While these strategies may enhance personal safety, maintaining hypervigilance requires sustained cognitive and psychological effort. This can also reduce the range of activities or locations where women feel comfortable participating. The need to continuously monitor personal safety adds an additional, gendered burden to the work of political campaigning, and potentially shapes how female politicians interact with constituents and experience the demands of electoral politics.

36 Krook, 2020; Bardall et al., 2020

Political Ambition

In the main, the experiences of violence here are shown to have a limited impact on participants' political ambition. Only two female participants conveyed that VAWIP has led them to consider withdrawing from representative politics. The overall majority holding office are not deterred from running for election again, and do not indicate reduced political ambition as a result of their experience of VAWIP. Existing research of female politicians in the Republic of Ireland suggests that the deterrent effect of political violence on women's political ambition may be moderated by incumbency. Women already holding elected office appear less likely to report intentions to withdraw from politics despite exposure to abuse.[37] This aligns with the results of the study here, suggesting that incumbency or holding office is associated with a resolve to persist with representative roles. Incumbency in this case may mitigate the deterrent effects of certain forms of abuse, albeit the sample here was comprised of incumbents alone.

37 Buckley, Keenan, and Mariani, 2023

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APPENDIX A: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Recognize, Resist, Rise Up: Tackling Gender-Based Violence against Women in Politics

As explained in the invitation you have received, and in the Participant Briefing document, the following are questions on various forms of violence against women in politics, including psychological, sexual, physical, economic and online abuse. It is an ANONYMOUS questionnaire and features a mix of closed and open-ended items. Please feel free to provide your honest response, with as much detail as you feel comfortable with. We appreciate your participation, insight, and experience, it is vital to our understanding and research.

If you agree to part in this study, please click 'I Consent' below acknowledging that:

- You understand the purpose of the study and the nature of the questions have been explained in the Participant Briefing
- Your participation is voluntary, and you understand that you may choose to not answer any question
- You understand that your response is anonymous and will be stored securely

☐ I Consent ☐ I Do Not Consent

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

1. **What, if any, political party are you a member of?**

☐ Fianna Fáil ☐ Fine Gael ☐ Sinn Féin ☐ Labour Party ☐ Green Party

☐ People Before Profit – Solidarity ☐ Social Democrats ☐ Independent Ireland

☐ Aontú ☐ Independent/Non-Party ☐ Other:_____

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2. **Which House of the Oireachtas are you currently a member of?**

☐ The Dáil ☐ The Seanad

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3. **Is this your first term as a member of the Oireachtas?**

☐ Yes ☐ No

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4. **For approximately how long have you been a representative in:**

The Oireachtas: _____ Years

Local Government: _____Years

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5. **What age group do you fall into?**

☐ 18–24 ☐ 25–34 ☐ 35–44 ☐ 45–54 ☐ 55–64 ☐ 65+ ☐ Prefer not to say

---

6. **What is your current marital status?**

☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ In a registered same-sex civil partnership ☐ Separated

☐ Divorced. ☐ Widowed ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ Other: _____

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7. **Are you a parent or legal guardian?**

☐ Yes ☐ No

If Yes, are they minors ☐ and/or adults ☐

SECTION 2: ECONOMIC VIOLENCE

The following questions concern any act or behaviour which denied you access to financial, material or other economic resources to which you were entitled in the context of your work as a public representative.

1. **Have you ever been refused funding to which you were entitled? For example, parliamentary allowances, sponsorship donations, campaign contributions, et cetera.**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe/explain in more detail.*

☐ No

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2. **Have you ever been refused parliamentary resources to which you were entitled? For example, facilities, computers, staff, security, et cetera.**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail.*

☐ No

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3. **Have your personal or parliamentary properties ever been damaged?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail.*

☐ No

If you answered NO to Questions 1, 2 and 3, please skip to Question 5

4. **Did you report any of these incidents?**

☐ Yes→ *If Yes, to whom? (Gardaí/ Someone within a political party, Someone within Parliament…)*

☐ No → *If No, please describe/explain how you dealt with the situation*

SECTION 3: PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

The following questions concern physical violence of threats of physical violence in the context your work as a public representative, including threats of bodily harm, assault or kidnapping.

5. **Has anyone ever threated to use or used physical violence against you?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail.*

☐ No

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6. **Has anyone ever threatened to use or used a weapon of any kind against you?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail.*

☐ No

---

7. **Have you ever been held in confinement against your will or had your movement curtailed? For example, been unable to leave a building or venue.**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail.*

☐ No

If you answered NO to Questions 5, 6 and 7, please skip to Question 9.

8. **Did you report any of these incidents?**

☐ Yes → *If Yes, to whom? (Gardaí/ Someone within a political party, Someone within Parliament…)*

☐ No → *If No, please describe/explain how you dealt with the situation*

SECTION 4: PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

The following questions concern any act which caused you psychological harm in the context of your work as a public representative, including threats, defamation, verbal insult or harassment.

9. **Have you ever been the target of sexist remarks or remarks with a sexual overtone?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe the remark and context in more detail.*

☐ No

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10. **Have you ever had the print or broadcast media publish images of you that were demeaning or had sexual overtones?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail.*

☐ No

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11. **Have you ever been harassed, or subject to persistent interactions that frightened you? For example, intimidating behaviour, unwelcome attention or contact.**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe the context in more detail*

☐ No

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12. **Have you ever received threats targeting you or those close to you? For example, members of your family, friends, staff or campaigning team et cetera.**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe the context in more detail*

☐ No

If you answered NO to Questions 9, 10, 11 and 12, please skip to Question 14.

13. **Did you report any of these incidents?**

☐ Yes → *If Yes, to whom? (Gardaí/ Someone within a political party, Someone within Parliament…)*

☐ No → *If No, please describe/explain how you dealt with the situation*

SECTION 5: SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

The following questions concern any sexual acts or attempts of sexual acts by coercion or force in the context of your work as a public representative, including unwanted sexual comments or innuendo, and sexual harassment.

The questions are of a particularly sensitive nature: any response detail is at your discretion.

1. **Have you ever encountered behaviour that you would describe as sexual harassment? For example, sexually oriented remarks or jokes, sexual suggestions, or unwanted touching.**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail*

☐ No

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2. **Have you ever been forced against your will to engage in sexual acts, sexual intercourse or forced to carry out something of a sexual nature?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe the context in more detail*

☐ No

If you answered NO to Questions 14 and 15, please skip to Question 17.

3. **Did you report any of these incidents?**

☐ Yes → *If Yes, to whom? (Gardaí/ Sexual violence support services, Someone within a political party, Someone within Parliament…)*

☐ No → *If No, please describe/explain how you dealt with the situation*

SECTION 6: ONLINE VIOLENCE

The following questions concern online violence in the context of your work as a public representative, including abuse, threats and harassment facilitated by technology.

1. **Have you ever had images of you published on social media or online platforms that were demeaning or had sexual overtones?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail.*

☐ No

If you do not have a social media account, you can skip to question 22.

2. **Have you received abusive, hateful or threatening comments under your social media posts?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail*

☐ No

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3. **Have you received abusive, hateful or threatening private messages on your social media?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe in more detail*

☐ No

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4. **Do you think gender is a factor in abusive or threatening comments that you receive online?**

☐ Yes → *If you can, please describe/explain in more detail*

☐ No

If you answered NO to Questions 18, 19 and 20, please skip to Question 22.

5. **Did you report any of these incidents?**

☐ Yes → *If Yes, to whom? (Gardaí/ Social media regulator, Someone within a political party, Someone within Parliament…)*

☐ No → *If No, please describe/explain how you dealt with the situation*

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6. **To what extent has each of the following been a means through which you've received abusive or threatening comments?**

Text messages	☐ Not at all	☐ Only a little	☐ Some	☐ A good amount	☐ A lot
Phone calls	☐ Not at all	☐ Only a little	☐ Some	☐ A good amount	☐ A lot
Social media	☐ Not at all	☐ Only a little	☐ Som	☐ A good amount	☐ A lot
E-mails	☐ Not at all	☐ Only a little	☐ Some	☐ A good amount	☐ A lot
Post	☐ Not at all	☐ Only a little	☐ Some	☐ A good amount	☐ A lot
In-person	☐ Not at all	☐ Only a little	☐ Some	☐ A good amount	☐ A lot

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SECTION 7: IMPACTS AND INTERVENTIONS

The following questions concern professional and personal impacts as well as existing and prospective interventions, and their efficacy.

1. **Have your stances on certain issues or policy areas made you more susceptible than others to harassing, abusive, and sexualized speech or violence?**

_____

2. **Have you changed your behaviour or political activities as a result of your experiences? [Please select all that apply].**

☐ *It has changed my advocacy on issues or policy areas*

☐ *It has changed my legislative agenda on issues or policy areas*

☐ *It has changed my canvassing/campaigning behaviour in my constituency*

☐ *It has changed my engagement with social media*

☐ *Other*: _____

If you can, please describe any of the above in more detail

_____

3. **Have your experiences had any of the following effects? [Please select all that apply].**

☐ *I was worried about my or loved ones' safety*

☐ *My family or loved ones worried about my safety or their own safety*

☐ *I was worried about my staff's safety*

☐ *It impacted my physical or mental health and wellbeing*

☐ *I increased security at my home or my workplace*

☐ *None of the above*

☐ *Other*: _____

_____

4. **To what extent have your experiences impacted on your likelihood to run for election again?**

_____

5. **What kind of support(s) helped you deal with your experiences?**

_____

6. **In your opinion, to what extent is the following statement true: there are sufficient mechanisms and tools in the Republic of Ireland to detect and prevent harassing, abusive, and sexualized speech or violence against female politicians?**

☐ *Not at all true* ☐ *Not very true* ☐ *Neither untrue nor true* ☐ *Fairly true* ☐ *Very true*

_____

7. **What mechanisms or tools would you like developed to detect and prevent harassing, abusive, and sexualized speech or violence against female politicians?**

_____

8. **What supports or training could Women for Election offer to help you in your work?**

_____

9. **What, for you, are the most rewarding aspects of being a public representative?**

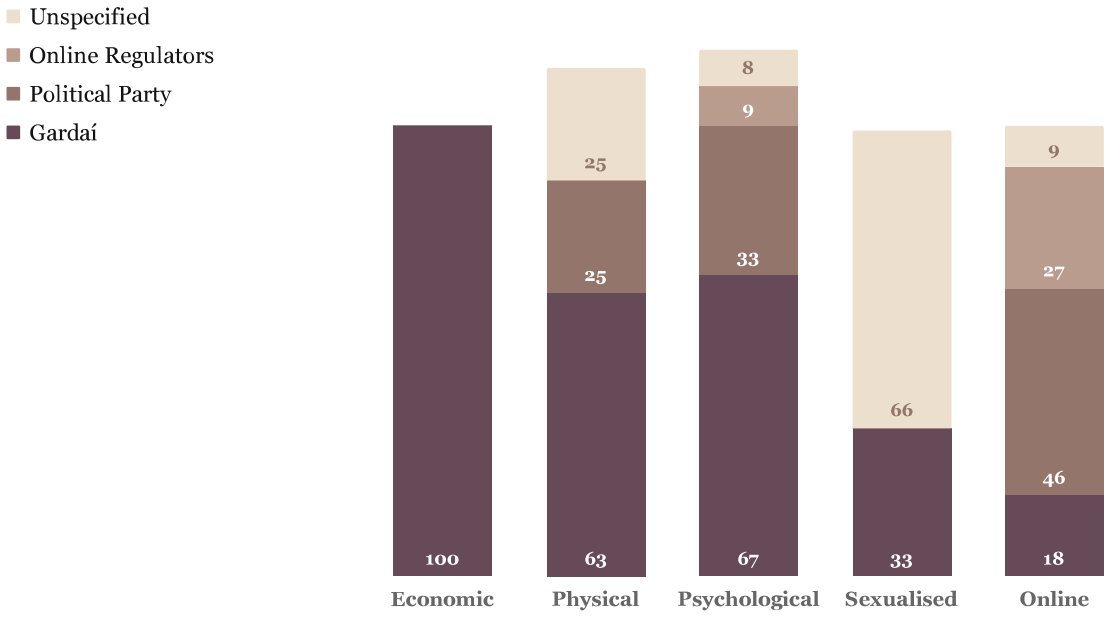
_____

10. **If you have other comment, that has not been captured in this questionnaire, please use the space below:**

_____

APPENDIX B: DESTINATION OF REPORTING ACROSS TYPE

Destination of Reporting by Violence Experienced (%)



Note: As some incidents were reported to multiple channels the percentage in some columns exceeds 100