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POLITICS

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Network of **Women** in Politics

Summary of the e-Discussion on  
**Violence Against Women in Politics**

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## LAUNCHING MESSAGE

For more than one year, the groundbreaking [#MeToo](#) movement and related [Time's Up](#) initiative have broken taboos and sparked an unprecedented global conversation about the sexism, harassment and violence many women face in professional environments.

Women politicians have also been saying [#MeToo in politics](#). With women comprising just 5.2 per cent of Heads of Government, 6.6 per cent of Heads of State,<sup>1</sup> and 24 per cent of parliamentarians<sup>2</sup> globally, politics is overwhelmingly male-dominated. But as in workplaces in other sectors, women are increasingly present in parliaments and elected assemblies, government bodies and political parties. As women continue to defy gender norms that have traditionally kept them out of politics, they encounter hostility and violence in these institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Violence against women in politics can be physical, sexual or psychological in nature. Both men and women can be affected by violence in politics, but violence against women in politics is gender-based. It targets women because of their gender and the acts of violence are gendered in form, such as sexist remarks or sexual harassment and violence. Violence against women in politics is a violation of human rights, and by hindering women's political participation, it is also a violation of women's political rights.<sup>4</sup>

An Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) global [study](#) published in 2016, and a 2018 [study](#) focused on European countries, found that violence against women in politics is widespread. Both studies revealed that more than 80 per cent of surveyed women Members of Parliament (MPs) had experienced acts of psychological violence, which included, inter alia, threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction during their parliamentary terms. The studies also revealed that acts of psychological violence against women MPs are especially profuse online and on social media. Sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats against women in public life or women who express political opinions publicly have become commonplace. Young women MPs and those women active in the fight against gender inequality and violence against women were often singled out for attack.

The studies also showed that a quarter of the women parliamentarians interviewed were the target of sexual harassment perpetrated by male parliamentary colleagues, both from their own political party and from parties opposed to their own.

### Objective of the e-Discussion

The global fight to promote women's equal participation in decision-making and to end all forms of violence against women is receiving unprecedented attention as more women in politics speak out through the [#MeToo](#) movement. Likewise, the adoption of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) have put a global spotlight on the commitments of all countries to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls (SDG Target 5.2) and ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> Situation as of 1 November 2018. Data compiled by UN Women based on information provided by Permanent Missions to the United Nations.

<sup>2</sup> Situation as of 1 October 2018. Women in National Parliaments World Average, IPU: [archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm](http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm) (accessed on 6 November 2018).

<sup>3</sup> IPU, "Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe", Issues Brief. October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on violence against women in politics", para 11. August 2018. See also UN Women, "Violence against women in politics: Expert Group Meeting report and recommendations", 2018, and NDI, Not The Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics, 2016.

leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life (SDG Target 5.5). iKNOW Politics and its partners launched this e-Discussion alongside the [16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence](#). Contributions in Arabic, English, French and Spanish were received from **26 November to 21 December 2018**. The e-Discussion seeks to raise awareness on the issue of gender-based violence against women in politics and expand the dialogue on how to make political spaces safer and more inclusive for women.

## Questions

1. Why do you think violence against women in politics occurs and is so widespread?
2. IPU reports that about half of the women MPs subjected to acts of violence do not report them to the parliamentary security service and/or the police. Reporting rate for acts of sexual harassment are even much lower. Why do you think that is? What needs to change to ensure all incidents are reported?
3. Social media is a top place in which psychological violence (e.g. sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats) is perpetrated against women in politics. How do you explain this? How can we make sure social media is a safe space for them?
4. Violence against women in politics makes the work of women politicians difficult and potentially dangerous and therefore unattractive as a career option. What message would you give to women who are discouraged from engaging in political life because of the fear or threat of violence?

## CONTRIBUTIONS

The following eighteen participants joined this e-Discussion:

1. [Agripinner Nandhego](#), Programme Specialist, Political Participation and Leadership, UN Women, **Uganda**
2. [Akua Dansua](#), Former Minister of Youth and Sports (first female to occupy the post to date) and former Ambassador of Ghana to Germany, **Ghana**
3. [Dr. Ameena Al-Rasheed](#), iKNOW Politics Expert, Consultant, former Assistant Professor and UN Regional Advisor, **United Kingdom**
4. [Batoul Abdel Hay](#), former Member of Parliament, member of the Network of Arab Women Parliamentarians Ra'edat, **Mauritania**
5. [Bea Abellan](#), Advocacy Manager at Glitch, **United Kingdom**
6. [Fatima Mena](#), Mayor of San Pedro de Sula, **Honduras**
7. [Gabrielle Bardall](#), Gender Advisor at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), **United States**
8. [Dr. Indra Biseswar](#), Coach and Gender Consultant, **Netherlands**
9. [Juliana Restrepo](#), Postdoctoral fellow at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, **Colombia**
10. [Kadidia Doumbia](#), Specialist in Gender and Education, **United States**
11. [Lourdine Dumas](#), Chief of Projects and Research, **Canada**
12. [Lytha Loulou](#), iKNOW Politics user
13. [Monia Garci](#), Pharmacist and Board member of the NGO AMAL, **Tunisia**
14. [Nisreen Amer](#), Rights Without Chains Organization, **Libya**
15. [Paloma Román Marugán](#), Doctor in Political Science, Teacher at Complutense University of Madrid, **Spain**
16. [Sarah Mwambalasya](#), iKNOW Politics member, **Tanzania**

17. [Seyi Akiwowo](#), Founder of Glitch and former Local Councilor for Newham, East London, **United Kingdom**
18. [Tamarah Santana](#), President of Fundación Mujeres Salomé Ureña- FUNDAMUSA, **Dominican Republic**

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to participate in this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices and recommendations. The contributions are summarized below.

### 1. What is causing violence against women in politics to occur so widely across the world?

Women's political participation and representation has made unprecedented progress over the last century. However, women are far below equal representation at every level of political decision-making across the world. Women continue to face prejudice, discrimination and acts of psychological and even physical violence when they join a field from which they have been traditionally excluded and actively dissuaded. Men in politics also face violence, but the motives and the impact of VAWP are different for women. Participants agree that VAWP contributes to the lack of political participation and representation of women globally and, by extension, threatens women's rights, gender equality and democracy.

Like all forms of violence against women, VAWP is a product of structural inequality and deep-rooted prejudice caused by continuous patriarchal oppression and repression. Manifestations of VAWP include, from one end of the spectrum, unconscious bias and symbolic oppression to every-day sexism, discrimination, harassment and ultimately violence on the other. Participants argue that VAWP is the most radical form of violence against women, because aside from being a blatant manifestation of inequality, it institutionalizes women's subordinate position in society by systematically denying them their rights and excluding them from public decision-making.

Drawing from her experience in **Ethiopia** and **India**, [Dr. Indra Biseswar](#) argues that gender norms are generally still rigid in many communities, especially rural ones, when it comes to women in leadership positions. Women running for political office defy social norms and are considered 'intruders' of a space not meant for them. For this, they are often scrutinized, stigmatized and targeted.

It is challenging for women wishing to get involved in politics to get the necessary support. Aware of the barriers women face pursuing a political career, family members and friends tend to discourage women from following this path. Sometimes, as [Aripinner Nandhego](#) reports, family members and friends are the ones inflicting psychological and other forms of violence on women candidates and aspirants. In **Uganda**, a recent study released by the Uganda Bureau of statistics revealed that 90% of respondents attributed women's low political representation to their need for obtaining husbands' permissions before standing for election. Women who choose to defy their traditional role in the society and the family thus put themselves at risk of violent resistance and retaliation.

Political parties provide another space where women can be subject to violence. [Fatima Mena](#) shares a National Democratic Institute (NDI) study focused on the violence women face within political parties in **Honduras**. The study, which is based on a survey, a focus group and in-depth interviews with political party members and leaders, reveals that VAWP occurs in general party life, more specifically in the selection and nomination of candidates and in carrying out elected office duties. Although there are generally as many women as men party activists, women do not enjoy the same consideration for

candidate and leadership positions as men do. Many women are limited in their engagement because their financial autonomy, and time and freedom to use it, are limited.

[Juliana Restrepo](#) argues that VAWP is a result of the growing efforts to make politics more gender-balanced. As more women enter politics, perpetrators have more opportunities to commit acts of violence. The increased presence and engagement of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces, especially politics, creates a sense among men of losing ground and they turn to violence to maintain the status quo of the power dynamic. She shares that women who challenge traditional roles by demonstrating leadership ambitions and aspiring to elected office are often attacked by those who wish to ‘put them in their place.’

However, [Gabrielle Bardall](#) challenges the perception that VAWP is on the rise arguing that although VAWP has existed since women started demonstrating interest in politics, there is no data indicating that it has recently increased. Women politicians, experts and academics have raised awareness on the issue in the past decade or so, but this awareness she argues should not be confused with increased frequency or prevalence. To understand the phenomenon, baselines need to be put in place and research should focus on providing insight on the impact of women’s growing political representation and whether a backlash is occurring.

**2. IPU reports that about half of the women MPs subjected to acts of violence do not report them to the parliamentary security service and/or the police. Reporting rates for acts of sexual harassment are even much lower. Why do you think that is? What needs to change to ensure all incidents are reported?**

Reporting acts of VAWP remains a challenge, and this hinders the ability to fully understand the problem and find effective solutions to end it. Participants agree that the reasons preventing many women from reporting acts of VAWP are like those related to other acts of gender-based violence and abuse. They include shame, guilt and fear of blackmail, threats and backlash on their private and professional lives. Discrediting campaigns, scrutiny and intimidation, coupled with the lack of support and understanding for many women who have come forward, discourage others to follow suit.

[Lourdine Dumas](#) recalls the highly publicized case in which Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s sexual assault allegations against Brett Kavanaugh were dismissed which cleared his nomination to the United States Supreme Court. To her, the affair disgusted and dissuaded many women in the **United States** and beyond from reporting incidents because it showed how challenging it can be for women to be heard and bring their perpetrators to justice. Similarly, [Batoul Abdel Hay](#) and [Nisreen Amer](#) share that women in politics in **Libya** and **Mauritania** refrain from reporting incidents because they fear the ‘scandal’ they and their families would most certainly endure. In societies where honor and reputation are a matter of survival for women, the potential gains from reporting acts of violence are simply not worth it.

Reporting challenges are amplified when it comes to VAWP, [Gabrielle Bardall](#) argues, because female politicians and leaders may feel additional pressure to appear ‘tough’ and avoid perceptions of weakness that might result from incidents perceived as shameful and embarrassing. Furthermore, fearful of inadequate treatment by police officers, potential retaliation, and the “double burden of proving they were attacked and who their perpetrators were”, as [Juliana Restrepo](#) puts it, victims in many countries avoid reporting and risking being retraumatized by the reporting process itself .

Participants share the view that the reporting mechanisms that do exist are weak and ineffective. [Juliana Restrepo](#) shares examples of how these mechanisms malfunction in practice, as she concluded in her research on VAWP in **Latin America**:

Women have to report the incident to party leaders who in many cases are the ones perpetrating violence or are close allies of the perpetrator. When women report in these instances, they are ostracized because they are seen as betraying the party. In other cases, procedures to report [VAWP] are burdensome, especially for women in rural areas. They may also involve complex bureaucratic or legal procedures that take... longer than an electoral campaign... Another element that undermines reporting is that women who are attacked are not usually believed or their complaints are dismissed as irrelevant, not grave enough, or as 'the cost of doing politics'. This behavior ignores that [VAWP] frequently escalates, and seemingly minor actions -- such as public insults and humiliating images -- are followed by more overt forms of violence such as physical and sexual violence.

To be effective, reporting mechanisms must act fast, provide options for reporting with anonymity, and be victim-centered and independent. They also must consider women's specific needs and refrain from doubting the veracity of complaints as studies on violence against women have time and again shown that false reporting is extremely rare. [Akua Dansua](#) urges political institutions such as parliaments and political parties to adopt codes of ethics specifying sanctions for all acts of VAWP and to make sure all members and staff, regardless of hierarchy, sign on. All these measures would boost women in politics' confidence in their workplaces' accountability mechanisms and therefore help them feel safer while doing their job. In a self-reinforcing dynamic, this would encourage more women to report VAWP incidents, and as more stories are unveiled, reporting and accountability mechanisms can be improved.

**3. Social media is a top place in which psychological violence (e.g. sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats) is perpetrated against women in politics. How do you explain this? How can we make sure social media is a safe space for them?**

Acts of psychological VAWP are widespread on social media. Awareness about VAWP's negative impact on the ability of women in politics to freely and safely carry out their duties and, by extension, on the health of democratic institutions, is low. This is demonstrated by a recent case shared by [Agripinner Nandhego](#) of a woman MP in **Uganda** who reported sexual harassment on social media to the police, went to court to defend her case using the [Computer Misuse Act 2011](#) which criminalizes cybercrime, and was vehemently criticized by politicians and the public for reporting what they considered to be a 'normal occurrence'.

Social media platforms offer unique features that make them well-suited for perpetrators to inflict psychological violence on women in politics. While the direct access to politicians and the speed at which information is shared on social media may contribute to stronger and more transparent democracies, they are double-edged swords that enable all kinds of hate speech to appear and uncontrollably spread, thereby magnifying violence.

Furthermore, violence perpetrated through social media benefits from a significant degree of legal and moral impunity. The private messaging and anonymity social media offers complicate prosecution and emboldens perpetrators. For example, [Batoul Abdel Hay](#) shares the [story](#) of a woman MP in **Austria** who

was convicted of defamation against a male shop owner she publicly accused of sexually harassing her on Facebook because, although the messages came from his personal account, she could not prove he sent them. In his defense, the shop owner argued that all his customers have access to his computer and Facebook profile. The MP posted the harassing messages on her own page to defend herself because since the messages were private, she could not sue for public sexual assault.

Social media companies and regulators struggle with the conflict between promoting free speech and stopping hate speech. Tools like platform moderation, user reporting and censure can delete attacks, but these are often used after the damage has been done and there is no way to reverse it. [Gabrielle Bardall](#) argues that social media particularities facilitate so-called ‘morality-based’ attacks, such as accusations of prostitution, homosexuality and failed maternal duty, through the abundance of images and videos. Insults and edited demeaning images to sexualize women leaders poses a threat to their safety. Such attacks carry bigger costs for women than their male colleagues because of the prevalent double standards around what constitutes morality for men and women politicians. This phenomenon can disincentivize other women from considering a role in politics.

Participants propose to push social media companies to take greater responsibility over their users’ violent behavior and invest more in solving the problem they helped create. This could be done by using tools to develop targeted and strict automatic detection tools in all languages and dialects that would be followed by systematic deletion of violent comments, and naming and shaming perpetrators. Users prone to posting hateful content could have a special symbol or note attached to their profile. After a few incidents, such users could have their profiles deactivated. Also, whistleblowers could receive some sort of reward for reporting hateful content, be it a simple thank you note or credit to purchase ad space or a special product.

[Seyi Akiwowo](#) shares her experience with online abuse and her initiative to help other women avoid the same experience. When a video of her [speech](#) at the European Parliament went viral in 2017, as a young black woman in politics she was subject to “horrendous online abuse and harassment.” She then founded [Glitch](#), a non-profit organization based in the **United Kingdom** to end online abuse, including VAWP. By choosing the name Glitch, a temporary equipment malfunction, the founder aims for future generation to look back at the present time and qualify the prevalence of gender-based online abuse and harassment as a simple ‘glitch’ in history.

Glitch’s strategy to make the internet and social media a safe space for women politicians relies on three fronts. First, tech workshops are offered to empower women and help them cope with the hostile online environment as well as digital citizenship workshops for young people to help educate the next generation on becoming good online citizens. Second, a culture of ‘active bystanders’ is encouraged through advocacy. Third, a tech tax campaign was launched, demanding governments to raise funds from tech companies to combat online abuse. Such funds would be used to raise public awareness on online abuse and VAWP so that more women can safely express themselves on social media.

Looking into the impact of VAWP on women’s political participation and ambition, [Seyi Akiwowo](#) reports that NDI is currently conducting a data analysis of political discourse on Twitter among students in **Indonesia, Kenya and Colombia**. Upcoming findings will be used to better target advocacy efforts to promote reform in social media companies’ policies and in national and international legal frameworks that would ensure women participate in online discussions with no fear of violence.

**4. Violence against women in politics makes the work of women politicians difficult and potentially dangerous and therefore unattractive as a career option. What message would you give to women who are discouraged from engaging in political life because of the fear or threat of violence?**

Women in politics are faced with relentless violence, whether it is online or offline, because they pose a serious threat to the privileges men have always enjoyed. “Stakes are very high in politics, because politics is the business of power” says [Gabrielle Bardall](#). And given that power is taken and never given, women have no choice but to keep asserting their presence in politics and claiming their right to equality with men by resisting attempts of intimidation and exclusion.

Participants agree that it is important for women as a group to build strong supportive networks to help them combat violence. Women’s caucuses are a good example of a national-level network where women MPs can turn for support regardless of party affiliation, says [Agripinner Nandhego](#). [Akua Dansua](#) cites iKNOW Politics as an effective global online network that facilitates the exchange of experiences of women in politics and with that educates, encourages and empowers more women, especially young women, to run for political office. Having more women in politics is the first defense against VAWP and eliminating violence altogether; with more women lawmakers, there is greater potential for more gender-sensitive laws and practices, more just societies, and no more violence.