

# violence against women in politics

Ana Radičević

## community of democracies – on our joint path to more humane societies

More than two centuries have passed since the concept of human rights was first developed. During that time, humanity has gone through various stages of history and the world has seen enormous changes. Thriving and healthy societies are those that secure justice, security, freedom and dignity to all of its individuals. Those societies allow the fulfilment of human potential, create prosperity and are based on democratic culture, which is a way of life that implies civility, inclusion, flexibility and compromise. In a community that emphasises tolerance, flexibility and moderation, people may disagree about politics and diverge over faith and culture, but they show mutual respect and tolerate their differences.<sup>1</sup> Political tolerance requires social tolerance, because democratic governance must reconcile not only divergent political preferences but also the claims, interests and sensitivities of different classes and identity groups. That requires the ability and intention to hear ‘the other’, respect and take into account specific social groups’ opinions and communicate with them in a tone of civility and mutual respect. If contending politicians and activists vilify one another as evil and

immoral, communication swiftly turns to the point of violence, which is toxic to democratic stability.

Sadly, in Southeast Europe, as well as globally, democracy and pluralism are under assault. Political leaders in nascent and fragile democracies are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas. Ruling political elites in a number of Southeast European countries have steadily eroded political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, civil society, and nascent independent institutions such as the ombudsperson, state audit, or anti-corruption agencies.

Prominent sociologists and independent media report increased ‘brutalisation’ of the public sphere and political discourse in the region. This increased violence in public speech, frequently initiated by political elites, has decreased the space for tolerant dialogue, civilised disagreements, and pluralism of opinions.

*The atmosphere of violence seems to be on the rise, and when democratic norms and standards deteriorate, women are one of the first marginalised groups to bear the consequences.*

Ana Radičević is the Resident Program Director for the National Democratic Institute’s Regional political integrity program for Southeastern Europe, based out of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She graduated from the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade and received her Masters Degree in the field of European Studies at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sarajevo. Prior to her time in Bosnia, Ana’s two decades of service for democracy assistance organizations included positions in NDI’s Kosovo, Serbia and Washington, DC offices, where she managed political party and parliamentary programs working with senior government and political party officials, as well as with media, foreign embassies, international organizations, aid agencies and research institutions to support democratic culture and civil society initiatives. She conducted numerous trainings and took part in democracy assistance discussions for NDI in Southeastern Europe and Westminster Foundation for Democracy in Central and West Africa.

## why is inclusion in politics, including women's political participation, fundamental for a better world?

Women's political participation has profound positive democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizen's lives. Their inclusion results in tangible gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace. This has been consistently proven by scientific research and personal experience. Kofi Annan noted: "Study after study has taught us, there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity or to reduce child and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation."<sup>2</sup>

Research indicates that whether a legislator is male or female has a distinct impact on their policy priorities, making it critical that women are present in politics to represent the concerns of women and other marginalised voters and help improve the responsiveness of policy making and governance.<sup>3</sup> There is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is also a corollary increase in policy-making that emphasises quality of life and reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Research also shows that women lawmakers tend to see 'women's' issues more broadly as social issues, possibly as a result of the role that women have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers in their communities,<sup>4</sup> and that more women see government as a tool to help serve underrepresented or minority groups.<sup>5</sup> Women lawmakers therefore have often been perceived as more sensitive to community concerns and more responsive to constituency needs. In addition to that, women prioritise education, health and other key development indicators; they can "increase the legitimacy of nascent institutions, decrease government corruption, broaden the political agenda, promote consultative policymaking and encourage collaboration across ideological lines and social sectors".<sup>6</sup>

Even though women's political participation and representation made unprecedented progress over the last century, there is still a long way to go before women and girls can be said to enjoy their fundamental rights, freedom and dignity that are their birth right, because there are numerous barriers to women's political participation. Cultural barriers make it difficult for them to be perceived as political leaders and create negative perceptions of politics as a dirty business only suitable for men. Due to the way gender roles are defined in many societies, women may be excluded from formal and informal networks necessary for advancing in politics. Additionally, the culture within parties and the accepted norms of behaviour can make them uncomfortable places for women.

*"Barbie provoking conversations on gender inequality"*  
by Robin Prime - flickr - CC-BY 2.0



## what is violence against women in politics (VAW-P)?

There is a political phenomenon that has been largely overlooked and hidden over the years, a phenomenon that seems to be one of the major reasons women are discouraged to participate in politics, at the same time making the active ones withdraw from political activity (they “silence” themselves to avoid violence and retaliation). This phenomenon is identified as a unique form of violence and is called violence against women in politics (VAW-P).

*It is clear to most of us that women’s voices are frequently not heard in positions of power. Academic studies and countless anecdotes make it clear that being interrupted, isolated, talked over, shut down, or penalised for speaking out is nearly a universal experience of women in politics. While both men and women do experience violence in politics, women are subjected to particular types of violence and intimidation that would rarely, if ever, happen to men.*

In addition to specific forms of violence that happen uniquely to women, the National Democratic Institute’s research “No party to violence” indicates that women are more likely than men to experience violence in general within their political parties. In this research, 96% of total respondents (including both men and women) said that women are more likely to experience violence in politics as compared to men.

Like all forms of violence against women, the causes of VAW-P are complex, one of them being a product of structural inequality and deep-rooted prejudice caused by continuous patriarchal oppression and repression. The increased presence and engagement of women in traditionally male-dominated spaces over the last two decades, especially politics, creates a sense of losing power among some men. As a result, they may turn to violence to maintain the status quo. Women who challenge traditional gender roles by demonstrating leadership ambitions and aspiring to elected office, are often attacked by those who wish to “put them in their place”.

As a result, women continue to face prejudice, discrimination, and acts of psychological and even physical violence when they join a field from which they have traditionally been excluded and actively dissuaded. Men in politics also face violence, but the motives and the kinds of violence against women are different and based on gender. These incidents undermine women’s competence, which stymies equal access to positions of power and reinforces the status quo. In addition, in many cases even non-gender-motivated violence can still have a disproportionately higher impact on women, because they occupy a subordinate status in society and are more vulnerable to attacks.

There are varieties of methods to intimidate, delegitimise or exclude women from political life. However,

*politically active women have complained of violence that falls into several common categories: psychological, physical, sexual, and economic.*

Some examples are coercive behaviour to control a person’s access to economic resources, unwelcome sexual comments or advances, injuries inflicted on women directly, as well as acts of bodily harm carried out against their family members, smear campaigns causing fear or emotional damage. There are many more.

The Assessment on Violence against Women in Politics conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>7</sup> undeniably identifies psychological violence as the most common form of abuse against politically active women. Given its insidious nature, it is the most difficult to be proven or talked about and it can range from subtle comments related to women’s competences or physical appearance to a wide spectrum of behaviours such as the psychological phenomenon of gaslighting,<sup>8</sup> making someone feel invisible, withholding information, conducting subtle smear campaigns, shaming, labelling as aggressive for behaviours which would be seen as energetic if a man engaged in them. Some of the mentioned and most common forms of psychological violence reported are found in examples of retaliation by male colleagues, when women challenge power dynamics, such as questioning the integrity and/or competence of their male colleagues.

To demonstrate the most common type of violence which reinforces traditional stereotypes and roles given to women, using domination and control to dissuade and exclude women from positions of power, one woman programme participant noted:

“Everything was alright while I was an assistant. The moment my competence increased, and I demonstrated a clear ability to take on higher positions, my problems with him began”.<sup>9</sup>

## what can we do to alleviate this problem?

Democracy practitioners, political party foundations and training centres are key stakeholder groups, and hold strategic positions for combating this phenomenon. National parliaments, political parties, gender equality mechanisms and government working groups should be instrumental in this effort as well. Bearing in mind that achieving gender equality in all areas, including politics, is an important objective pursued by the European Union, Commis-

sion instruments such as progress reports could add a dimension in dealing with this problem. One of the most important activities in that regard is raising awareness – it is needed to define and disseminate the concept of “violence against women in politics”, to give a name to these acts at the global, national and local levels. Along with awareness raising, various organisations can develop indicators and collect data on the prevalence, form and impact of violence against women in politics.<sup>10</sup> Programmes can play an important role in supporting networking among female politicians and civil society organisations interested in tackling this issue, whether on a formal or informal basis, by providing opportunities to connect during organisational or regional gatherings – or to connect virtually through organisation platforms. These organisations can consider providing training for women on how to respond to and mitigate acts of violence against women in politics, provide psycho-social support, advocate for change or decrease vulnerability and respond effectively to both in-person and online attacks. ■■■

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