Political Participation and Violence against Women in Politics in Southeastern Europe

Preliminary Report

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs

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The Olof Palme International Center is a Swedish non-governmental organization and the Swedish labour movement's cooperative body for international issues. The center's areas of interest include democracy, human rights and peace. The center is named after the late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme.

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Foreword

Women's political participation has profound positive 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. 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 birthright.

Women in southeastern Europe (SEE) remain significantly underrepresented at all levels of political decision-making. The underrepresentation of women in politics and public life is caused and supported by discrimination, harmful stereotypes, and gender-based violence (GBV). A unique form of violence against them in public space - violence against women in politics (VAW-P) - is one of the major reasons women are discouraged from participating in public life, and especially in politics. Consistent with the definition in a growing body of national law and international conventions governing violence against women more broadly, this form of violence happens in private and in protected public spaces, and is not restricted to acts of physical harm. In fact, it encompasses a spectrum of acts committed in person and, increasingly, online, that are designed to control, limit or prevent women's full and equal political participation.[1]

In order to address VAW-P it is necessary to understand its forms, where it occurs and why. Unfortunately, such violence is widespread and systematic, according to the research findings detailed in this report and in NDI's global prior research. Closely connected with patriarchy and overall perception of women in SEE societies, VAW-P also preserves traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and maintains structural and gender-based inequalities. It can take many forms, from misogynistic and sexist verbal attacks to acts of harassment and sexual harassment, in person and increasingly online, or even physical assault. Further, violence against women in politics is often normalized and tolerated. VAW-P is a globally underreported phenomenon, with the vast majority of women who have experienced attacks likely to remain silent about them. Where women fear or experience violent retribution for exercising their political activities, there is not equal access to rights and opportunities.

This violence has enduring consequences on women, their families, their political careers, and ultimately on the health of democracy itself. It affects women at each stage of their political engagement: as activists, candidates, elected officials, or in a variety of other political or public positions. Violence against women in politics is one of the most serious barriers facing politically active women, and its various manifestations have a global reach and ripple effect on all women.

NDI's focus on women's political empowerment comes from the belief that democratic resilience requires that political systems and processes take account of the voice and agency of all populations. NDI's multi-national approach to democratic development reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. Including women as equal participants in the decision-making that affects their lives and their communities, is both a rights issue and an issue of democratic integrity.

Therefore, this research will fit within NDI's more than five years of global research on VAW-P to help inform the design and implementation of programs in which will address VAW-P. Particularly relevant for the SEE region will be raising awareness, working with young politicians, governments, parliaments

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[1] National Democratic Institute, "Not the Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics."

and the media, including to transform masculinities in politics, in programs to ultimately shape political culture to not only include but welcome women in public life.

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Executive Summary

Gender equality is central to EU membership (Romania) and accession treaties (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia). Nonetheless, women in political life in SEE face many obstacles, including gender-based discrimination and stifling traditional gender roles. Women are politically underrepresented in all SEE countries, and in all decision-making bodies. Women from ethnic minority groups as well as LGBTQI+ communities face further marginalization and exclusion.

NDI's qualitative research in six countries (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia) found a number of challenges to increasing this participation. This research investigated socio-cultural norms that impact women's political participation and leadership in politics. These factors include the pervasiveness of stereotypical roles of women and men in society, lack of visibility of women's contributions to public and political action, and perceptions of politics as a male-dominated field.

The research particularly focused on participants' awareness, types, and frequency of VAW-P. It revealed low general awareness of VAW-P, yet high experience of or witnessing of VAW-P among study participants. Politicians from BiH, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia believe that gender-based violence happening in politics is a "normalized occurrence". Participants from Albania and Kosovo believe that gender-based violence against women in the politics of their country is not perceived as a "normalized occurrence."

Research participants stated that violence against women in the politics in their country is widespread. As many as 40 percent in the survey reported witnessing some form of violence in politics. Most such cases are recorded in BiH and Serbia. There, anecdotal observation suggests there are more women in politics who have publicly questioned established patriarchal norms, and therefore have experienced more targeting than those in other countries studied. Direct and secondary experience of violence was particularly high for forms of psychological and internet violence.

Overall, NDI found three consistent themes across the six countries:

1. Participants cited low awareness of what constitutes violence against women in politics across the region.
2. Participants noted weak frameworks for sanctioning violence against women.
3. Participants frequently described fears of speaking out, and the significant physical, psychological, and social impacts of violence.

Research Methodology

To better understand the issue of violence against women in politics, forms of violence and its impact on women's participation in public and political life, NDI conducted a qualitative study of this phenomenon with women in politics who have experienced, witnessed, or were familiar with acts of violence against women in politics. These incidents could be psychological, verbal, economic, sexual, physical both in person and online.

For the purposes of this research, "women in politics" includes all women involved in political activities, including those elected at the national or local levels, members and candidates of political parties, government officials at the local, national and international levels, civil servants, ministers, ambassadors and other positions in the diplomatic corps.

The research covered six countries in southeastern Europe countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. Between July 15 and October 15, 2020 research was conducted through 72 in-depth interviews using the Simulation Technique of Group Dynamics (STGD) method. With this methodology, the opinion of one respondent is conveyed to another respondent in another in-depth interview, as an argument. This simulates the discussion and argumentation that are a typical feature of focus groups.

Data collection and analysis was performed by VALICON Company, utilizing typical case sampling, which is a sample comprising typical representatives of the group in focus. Criteria for participant selection included: men and women with active political party membership, and men and women holding political functions at any level of government. Participation was not restricted based on other demographic characteristics.

The data collection process was conducted in two phases using interviews and online survey methods. Given the complexity and sensitivity of the research topic, the interviews explored the topic of violence against women in politics (without asking interviewees to discuss their personal experiences) while the survey questionnaire more directly explored those topics and issues. Interviewers had training in trauma management and experience in researching sensitive and potentially traumatic experiences.

Limitations

Of the 72 research participants, there were 12 male participants and 60 female participants. A sample of this size cannot be generalized to the entire population of the region or of the countries surveyed. Nonetheless, the sample is sufficient to suggest the findings are suitable to draw indicative conclusions. In addition, the online survey portion of the research utilized a sequential scale, and relied on participants' subjective assessments. Although respondents were repeatedly told that the survey was completely anonymous in line with European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR) codes, it remains possible that participants responded in ways they deemed socially acceptable or expected.

Context

Gender equality is central to EU membership (Romania) and accession treaties (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia. Nonetheless, women in political life in south eastern Europe face many obstacles, including gender-based discrimination and stifling traditional gender roles. Women are politically underrepresented in all SEE countries, and in all decision-making bodies. Gender norms that associate men with belonging in the public sphere and women belonging in the private, domestic sphere of family and home persist in southeastern Europe, as in many parts of the world. Such norms include perceptions that a woman's role should be restricted to the home and to caretaking, that politics is not relevant to the daily lives and needs of women, and that women are incapable and ineffective leaders.

Despite some improvements in women's participation at the national level across the six countries studied, the gap between men's and women's participation is most visible at the local level.[2] In the November 2020 local elections in BiH, for example, of 425 candidates for mayors, 29 were women, and only four were ultimately elected. In addition, women who are involved in politics are frequently perceived as "assistants" rather than decision-makers and as less capable than their male counterparts. Women remain underrepresented in democratic processes, both as decision-makers and in democratic policymaking.[3] Intersectionality is much neglected in political participation in SEE countries: women from ethnic minority groups as well as LGBTQI+ communities face additional significant barriers to entering politics, meaningful participation, decision-making, and leadership.

Gender quotas for political party candidate lists in elections are in place across the six countries studied: 30 percent of the less represented gender in all but two countries (40 percent is required in BiH and Serbia). While gender quotas can be an efficient mechanism, they have varying success, and flawed implementation can inhibit their ability to bolster women's numerical, effective, and sustained political leadership and empowerment. The Kvinna till Kvinna report "Women's Rights in Western Balkans"' shows that many inconsistencies and misuse of quota systems appeared over the period 2016-2020, from replacing women candidates who were elected with their male party colleagues to only partial implementation of quotas. Accordingly, participants in NDI's research showed divided opinions about quotas. They noted that mandatory positions provide an opportunity for women to participate in politics in greater numbers, and influence political parties to hire more women. They can also shift the quality and substance of policy development by ensuring women provide their perspective. However, participants also perceived negative effects of quotas, such as minimizing the importance of women in politics and preventing women from having real power and making decisions independently.

Research participants described the cultural context in each of their countries at the outset of discussions. Across all countries, many stated that gender barriers are a substantial additional hindrance for women in politics. Many respondents reported that the idea that politics is not a job that should be done by women still permeates the political sphere in Southeastern Europe and in turn influences public opinion. They cited a number of other challenges to their participation: family obligations or lack of support from the family, use of the family in political attacks and smear campaigns, obstruction by colleagues, lack of opportunities for advancement, minimization of the importance/influence/discounting of women, and discriminatory presentation of women politicians in the media (focusing on her appearance, clothing, or family circumstances rather than substantive issues). In addition, respondents noted that women are often siloed within the public sphere. They tend to be put into more "passive" roles as party members or advocates. Women, they described, tend to be represented in public spheres that align with what are

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[2] Gacanica, L. et al. *Women's Rights in Western Balkans 2020*, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2020, available at: https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/womens-rights-in-western-balkans-2020/ .

[3] Ibid.

traditionally considered "women's issues": health, human rights, and education. By contrast, men tend to hold positions that deal with finance and high politics. Participants described these challenges as common, and noted that in general they felt they could cope with them. However, respondents noted that the male-dominated informal ways and locations where politics and political decision-making occur - such as socializing in taverns, sports events, in travel - are particularly limiting. Another pervasive challenge identified by participants was the "glass ceiling" phenomenon in the politics of the countries of SEE, which prevents women from reaching leadership positions or positions of political power and decision-making. According to their experience, women are allowed to progress until the moment they become a perceived threat to the position of men.

The media, including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, internet, mobile phone communications, is a key factor in shaping the perception of the image of a politician. The media influences the behavior, attitudes and worldviews of both the general population and politicians themselves. Participants described the impact this can have on women in politics. Media, as they saw it, could play an ameliorating role by increasing coverage of women in politics and decision-making, increasing the public confidence of women in politics, condemning VAW-P, and promoting democratic values of inclusion and representativeness. They also emphasized that media can, and currently do, promote negative norms and stereotypes by providing insufficient coverage of women in politics, reinforcing sexist presentations and objectification of women in politics, trivializing the role of women in politics, or by focusing on tabloid and sensationalist reporting.

Participants cited advantages they perceived to women's leadership in politics as well. They perceived women in politics as less prone to corrupt practices than their male colleagues. In their perception, women are more inclined to follow the rules, they are less impulsive in making decisions, less willing to take risks.

Finally, participants decried the lack of a strategy driven by women themselves to increase political participation. They explained that strategies identified thus far to increase women's political participation have either called for interventions at the individual level such as networking among women, or to "engage in politics in a masculine way." The former is insufficient as they conclude that "women are more likely to support men in leadership positions than other women." The latter reinforces the harmful stereotype of masculinity as associated with power, confidence and competence. Therefore, participants cited a need for a distinct "women's strategy" with its own clear style, manner, and achievable goals.

Notable country-specific highlights from the participants include the below. While participants consistently cited that knowledge raising for women may be helpful, NDI recognizes that individual and socio-cultural level interventions are also necessary to transform harmful gender norms and create an enabling environment for women's political participation free from VAW-P.

- In Albania, politics are generally considered a "male activity." For women who enter politics, there is a lingering expectation that they must bow to their male colleagues' authority without question. Albanian research participants suggested that a political education could empower women interested in joining politics.
- In BiH, participants noted that society will rarely encourage women to take on leading positions in society and politics. Participants cited instances of the public questioning if a successful woman in politics "[is] accomplished as a wife and mother". Women generally do not hold the top positions in parties, such as the presidency and vice presidency.
- In Kosovo, many women are not allowed freedom of choice when it comes to independent voting, schooling, and economic strengthening and independence. Kosovar society appears to be "softening", allowing for more women in politics. The participants suggested starting with

education and overall empowerment of women (educational, economic, financial), to improve women's positions in politics.

- In Montenegro, participants noted that they still live by traditional patriarchal values, with pervasive stereotypes that "a woman has a primary place in the house", and unfulfillment with these roles reflects a personal failure. Although numerically represented, women politicians still do not hold positions of power. Although one of the candidates for the president of Montenegro was a woman, research participants believed that was too large of a step for Montenegro.
- In Romania, participants stated that gender inequality has only been eradicated "on paper". Culturally, Romanian society generally relegates women to domestic roles. Even in environments where, declaratively, gender equality is present, there is a significant difference in opportunities. Men continue to perform most "important" functions and reach decisions and agreements in informal circumstances—circumstances to which women's access is limited or completely disabled. Participants stated that the church, politics, educational institutions, and the media could contribute to breaking the patriarchal social patterns, but none of these institutions pays adequate and sufficient attention to these issues.
- In Serbia, respondents described how women in positions of power still follow the lead of men, whether overtly or behind the scenes. Participants also stated that women may not recognize gender discriminatory practices, which makes victims of gender prejudices, making victims less likely to report such instances. They did not focus as much on the need for men to recognize these practices, which also contributes to the problem of VAW-P.

Awareness of Violence Against Women in Politics

Despite gender equality entering onto the public agenda across SEE nearly two decades ago, significant changes to public consciousness have not occurred. Awareness about gender based discrimination in politics and in the general public is very low in SEE counties. NDI's findings show that problems of gender inequality, gender-based discrimination, or VAW-P, are not perceived to be widely discussed or understood. The perception was that almost no one talks about the problems of gender, gender-based discrimination, or violence in politics.

NDI's research found a low level of awareness among politicians about sexual harassment and the problems of verbal violence, gender discrimination and harmful "jokes". Politicians from BiH, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia believe that VAW-P is a "normalized occurrence". Participants from Albania and Kosovo believe that gender-based violence against women in the politics of their country is not perceived as a "normalized occurrence".

One notable exception in this research was Albania. There, younger women politicians showed a greater understanding of both gender inequality and violence against women in politics as compared to their peers in the country and around SEE. They tended to create initiatives on the topic, and to start cooperation with nongovernmental organizations and the international community. There is a significantly high number of women who do not acknowledge the problem of gender inequality and gender-based violence, which makes many discriminatory or violent behaviors "normalized", but also the fear from confronting male party colleagues who could jeopardize their status or position. In Montenegro, women who initiated gender initiatives reported being added to "black lists" and losing their power and status. Across SEE participants reported that gender-specific political language was generally avoided because it "diminishes the power and significance of a title". In fact, gender correctness has become a pejorative term used to silence or discredit someone or the significance of what they are saying.

Types and Frequency of Violence Against Women in Politics

This form of violence is intended to control or restrict women's participation in politics, and takes a variety of forms according to political, social, and cultural environments. VAW-P occurs in both private and public spaces, including in political parties and parliament. Generally, VAW-P restricts women's voice and power in politics. Unlike other forms of electoral or political violence usually carried out by political opponents, in these cases perpetrators may include a woman's family and friends, members. Additionally, media outlets can also promote VAW-P through their own reports by disseminating violent messages about women in politics.

Sixty-eight (68) percent of research participants stated that VAW-P in their country is widespread. As many as 40 percent of women report experiencing some form of VAW-P. BiH and Serbia are the case studies where the highest percentage of participants reported experiencing some form of VAW-P. Anecdotal observation suggests there are more women in politics in these countries who have publicly questioned established patriarchal norms, and therefore have become targets and experienced higher levels of violence. This research found that young women with less experience in politics and those who are perceived as a threat to men's positions experienced VAW-P more than their colleagues.

VAW-P as examined by this research took five primary forms: verbal/psychological, economic, sexual, physical, and online violence. Asked to assess how often they were exposed to some form of violence in politics (whether they were direct victims or directly observed violence perpetrated against others), participants stated that psychological abuse was most present in politics, followed by violence online. Economic violence was the most prevalent form of violence among politicians in BiH and Montenegro. Other forms of violence were noted as individual sporadic incidents, but ones that attract significantly more attention from the political community, the media, and the general public.

Reported Experience of VAW-P	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro	Kosovo	Romania	Serbia
Psychological	6.9	7.7	8.8	8.6	8.8	9.0
Economic Violence	3.0	4.2	3.4	5.0	3.0	2.8
Sexual Violence	2.8	1.8	1.7	1.6	1.8	1.9
Physical Violence	2.0	3.3	2.0	3.2	3.1	5.1
Internet Violence	6.5	8.8	6.9	8.6	8.5	9.5

Table 1: Level of direct (personal) or indirect (presence during the violence) experience of violence by participants on a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (highest). Those numbers in red represent the experiences and locations where violence was the worst.

Psychological Violence

Definition

Psychological violence in politics involves hostile behavior and abuse intended to cause fear and/or emotional damage. As described to participants, this category includes verbal abuse such as insulting but also a specific type of hidden abuse such as ignoring, isolating, withholding information, denying attention, and threatening women in politics. Such violence can range from subtle comments related to women's competences or physical appearance to a wide spectrum of behaviors such as the psychological phenomenon of gas-lighting, withholding information, conducting smear campaigns, shaming, labelling as aggressive for behaviors which would be seen as energetic if a man engaged in them; blackmailing; minimizing the importance of women's opinion or initiatives; exclusion from decision making; ignoring or speaking over; ascribing guilt and shame, or blaming for even banal problems; linking a woman's success with an influential man (e.g. father, husband, lover).

Occurrence in SEE

In SEE countries, psychological violence against women in politics was identified as the most widespread form of violence and is directed towards women in all positions. Participants reported that failure to recognize the forms and acts of psychological violence was particularly worrying, as it results in a lack of public condemnation.

Patriarchal norms create space for sexist jokes and comments, and other forms of psychological violence. Participants also noted that one motive of violence appears to be when others run out of substantive arguments against a proposal or position ("when they have nothing to say in discussion, they start to attack you as a woman to discredit your work or ideas"). Women noted fear of losing their job, low self-esteem, preference for taking the path of least resistance, and acceptance of these forms of behavior among themselves. Ultimately, this type of violence was often normalized across SEE.

Apart from Albania, where the reported experience of psychological and verbal violence participants described as of a moderate level, all other SEE countries reported high levels. Psychological violence often targeted different groups of women, such as those who are not married and women who have no children in Montenegro, or young women in Kosovo, Bulgaria, and Serbia. In Bulgaria acts of psychological violence are oriented towards intimidation in the form of gendered disinformation such as fabricating stories about a woman politician or her family, or proclaiming women politicians as traitors of the state.

Economic Violence

Definition

Economic violence includes the systematic denial of resources to women for election activities, or restricting women's access to resources that are available to men. Facilitators described this to research participants as coercive behavior that controls women's access to economic resources, thus depriving women of the resources necessary for active political action, professional development, or routine political activity that belong to them by law or are otherwise available to their male colleagues. While less visible, it strongly impacts women in politics, either in a direct way or contributing to vulnerability for other forms of violence. Research respondents cited, for example, fear of losing job or position, economic dependence on their job or on men in power, or smaller chances for promotion. Participants also noted that male

colleagues have disproportionate control of ministries, clubs, commissions, and budgets. Other forms include the disproportionate financial support to men's projects; lack of paid positions or predominance of poorly paid for women in politics; restricted or no access to money within the political parties for women; lack of women participating in decision-making how to distribute/spend party money or budgets; lack of financing women's political campaigns.

Occurrence in SEE

Respondents reported that perpetrators of economic violence were generally male political/political party leaders and political workers at all levels. As with other types, external factors contributing to economic violence were primarily patriarchal norms, and poor enforcement of existing laws. Both result in economic power resting primarily in the hands of men, and non-recognition of forms and acts of economic violence.

Respondents reported economic VAW-P less frequently. Those from two countries recognized intimidation targeting women (with their political position/existence) in order to enforce obedience to the party (BiH, Montenegro), while others notice that political parties rarely or never fund women's projects (Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, BiH). Participants vocalized a "helplessness to change anything" (BiH), which lead to low or non-existing reporting of economic violence against women in politics.

Sexual Violence

Definition

Sexual violence includes any sexual act or attempt to carry out or obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or attempts to sexually exploit a person by force or coercion. This, as described to participants, includes harassment, includes including unwanted sexual comments, sexual exploitation, rape, threats of violence, forced sexual services for promotion, unwanted touching, but also jokes of inappropriate content. Forms observed in SEE countries, included: inappropriate or unwanted comments; gender-based insults; commenting on physical appearance; prejudice based on advancement; unwanted touching, inappropriate forms of communication, sending messages/calls, inappropriate nonverbal communication, and sexist jokes.

Occurrence in SEE

While sexual and gender-based harassment are prohibited by gender equality laws and anti-discrimination laws, these are rarely effectively enforced in the political sphere in SEE. Few participants witnessed timely condemnation of this behavior when it occurred in political spaces, which perpetuates this type of violence.

Women in politics expressed fears related to this speaking out about this form of violence: a fear of being perceived as helpless, of this violence being minimized or disbelieved when reported ("she deserved it/she asked for it"), of undermining their credibility, or that it will limit opportunities for advancement. Women respondents did not agree on a unifying definition of what was acceptable, citing blurry boundaries about how a woman could "allow" herself to be approached in the workplace.

Participants stated that external factors contributing to sexual violence include public ignorance of the issue, and poor implementation of legal solutions or internal party codes of conduct and procedures for sanctioning inappropriate forms of behavior.

Physical Violence

Definition

Physical violence includes any violent act that results in bodily harm. It is the intentional use of physical force with the potential to cause physical harm. As described to participants, physical violence in politics includes using force as retaliation, including slapping, pulling, pushing, inflicting bodily injury, assault with a weapon, and similar instances. Acts of physical violence reported by women in politics in SEE included; pushing; physical assault; squeezing.

Occurrence in SEE

Most participants stated that SEE countries reported low exposure to this type of violence in politics. Serbia reported the highest level of physical violence. In all countries, higher levels of physical violence were identified associated with tensions due to conflict situations.

Respondents from BiH and Serbia reported instances of abduction, slapping, mobile phone theft, and hair pulling as physical violence against women in politics. Women participating in local political levels, women in less-powerful positions, and women present when conflict occurs, are most likely to experience physical forms of violence. According to the research participants, an additional external factor in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the perception of rule of law, where public perception tends to be that most male political officials are above the law.

Internet Violence

Definition

Internet violence is a general term for any communication activity with cyber-technology, which can be considered harmful to both the targeted individual and the consumers of digital technology and participants in online discourse. Online violence includes inciting group hatred, attacks on privacy, harassment, stalking, insults, unscrupulous access to harmful content, and the spread of violent and offensive comments. As identified in NDI's Tweets That Chill[4] report on the unique phenomenon of Online VAW-P: "This activity can be anonymous, borderless, sustained, and permanent. The perception of impunity emboldens perpetrators and raises women's sense of insecurity and violation."

Occurrence in SEE

Research reflected different levels of online VAW-P in SEE countries: respondents from Montenegro and Albania reported moderate exposure, while findings for BiH, Kosovo, Romania and Serbia suggested a higher level of exposure to internet violence. Women who are public figures, including government officials, are the main victims of internet violence. Perpetrators were often from media and particularly tabloid media, and the general public. Participants from Kosovo and Romania stated that society's general indication of does and does not constitute violence is very much reflected in the discussion on VAW-P, for example, with many respondents considering online physical threats and blatant harassment as examples of online violence, while rude comments about appearance may not.

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[4] National Democratic Institute. "Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics."

For all SEE countries, sanctions are weak or do not exist for these forms of online VAW-P. Public Publicity, and particular public profiles on social media, appears to create space for this type of violence against women in politics. Echoing NDI's prior research on online VAW-P,[5] participants believed that internet violence prevents or restricts women from engaging in politics, affects their private lives as well as their public image. Participants stated that motives for internet violence are to discourage women from engaging in politics, to weaken a woman's power, and to minimize women's influence.

Consequences of Violence Against Women in Politics

VAW-P is a significant social problem with serious consequences that affect all aspects of a woman's life. The research finding indicates that VAW-P has an impact beyond its primary targets: it also seeks to send a message to society that women as a group should not participate in politics. Intimidating one woman to stop her political activities can discourage other women from engaging in politics, both undermining their rights and reinforcing women's political exclusion more broadly. A lack of condemnation or response to VAW-P can have wide-ranging repercussions, including reinforcing hostile environments where women do not feel safe reporting the violence they face NDI's research showed that women subject to violence fear secondary victimization, blaming, and endangering their image of fearlessness and strength. These dynamics and impunity for perpetrators further diminishes space for adequate response to VAW-P, and few institutional or systemic avenues for recourse and support exist.

Participants described short and long term physical and psychological consequences of experiencing VAW-P. Health consequences mentioned by participants included headaches, sleep disorders, panic attacks, depression, anxiety, rumination, fear, and low self-esteem. In terms of impact on their work, women politicians reported taking frequent sick leave, noted reduced work performance and increased pressure, and passed up opportunities. Women reported accepting the situation and patterns of violent behavior, political apathy, and ultimately leaving their political parties or their positions in political and public life. Women also noted reduced credibility within their families, saw their family members suffer from physical and psychological ailments, witnessed the victimization of children/partners/extended family, and experienced divorce. Within society, VAW-P directly and indirectly perpetuates the idea that politics is "men's business" or that "women are incapable of politics." It demotivates women who would potentially join public and political life and drives those that are currently participating away from public life entirely. Further, it is a threat to democracy and the core principles of representation and inclusion.

Special Focus: The COVID-19 Pandemic

Only political processes that are reflective of citizens' diverse experiences and accountable to the marginalized social groups will produce pandemic responses that mitigate rather than deepen social and gender inequalities. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the way women around the world perform their daily life, and pushed women and women's rights issues out of the spotlight. Data available, both worldwide and in SEE countries, shows that violence against women and domestic violence are on the rise during the pandemic. Research findings show that the themes of gender and gender-based violence tend to be set aside as less urgent or less essential during the social and economic crisis that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic has made

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[5] National Democratic Institute. "The Cost of Doing Politics? Analyzing Violence and Harassment against Female Politicians"

women less publicly visible and pushed debates over women's rights off the political agenda.[6] The pandemic has also impacted women differently than men, increasing inequities between women and men in the workplace, leading to significant drops in women's employment in the workforce, unequal unpaid care burdens, and regressive gender norms impacting men and women. It has also increased inequities between different groups of women.

While women working in politics were able, in most countries in this research, to transition to working from home, government working bodies responding to COVID-19 were predominantly populated by men. Women research participants described the immediate consequences on their work during the pandemic: increased workload, social isolation, and fears about the future. While the long term impacts of the pandemic on women's political participation are not fully known, the pandemic's profound political and socioeconomic effects could halt or reverse advances in women's political inclusion. "In the medium term, the lack of visible women leaders may further discourage women from engaging in politics, as institutions continue to send the message that women do not belong in politics".

Participants in NDI's research cited widely circulating global narratives that women leaders are better at responding to the pandemic. They noted that women politicians are more likely to prioritize social policies like welfare, health care and child care, and have personal characteristics (such as "calm, perceptive, wise but also courageous") best suited to pandemic response. However, these narratives tend to assess more superficial qualities—and even reinforce gender stereotypes—that obscure the real need for and obstacles to women's participation during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It also reinforces "gender stereotypes that associate men with political power and incorrectly relegate women to supporting roles or the domestic sphere."[7]

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[6] Brechenmacher, S and Hubbard, C. *How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion*. 17.11.2020, available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/17/how-coronavirus-risks-exacerbating-women-s-political-exclusion-pub-83213 .

[7] Brechenmacher, S and Hubbard, C. *How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion.*