

**Violence against Women
in Political Parties
in North Macedonia
- Assessment Report -**



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Skopje, September 2020



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Executive Summary

Globally, more women than ever before are taking part in politics. However, with the growth in women's political engagement, an increased frequency and degree of violent responses have emerged that prevent women from accessing their right to engage in politics and public life fully and equally. Conducting an assessment of violence against women (VAW) in political parties is essential to understand how it affects women's participation in political life and what measures are needed to combat and eliminate violence.

This research shows that female representation in political parties in North Macedonia has a long way to go. When paired with the under-representation of women in state functions, the problem seems less than encouraging. The quota system adopted for women's representation in parliament and local councils is only scratching the surface. Declarative support does not yield the desired effects. When it comes to implementation, the question emerges whether the political parties recognize the importance and impact of increased women's representation on the party, the institutions, and society. While everyone agrees that under-representation and violence against women politicians exist and are highly prevalent even in advanced democratic communities, not everyone is ready to admit or accept this form of violence or that change must come from within political parties.

Political parties in North Macedonia lack fundamental protections for women members, activists, and political representatives. Party statutes or codes of conduct are silent on gender-based violence, including harassment, coercion, defamation, and physical or psychological violence. Party officials — female and male — admit to not recognizing unacceptable conduct as violence towards women but rather tolerate violent behavior as the “cost” of engaging in politics.

The practice of unpacking the notion of violence during focus group discussions was of great educational and transformative value. It tangibly encouraged more respondents to share their direct or indirect experiences with violence as political party members. At the same time, it was also indicative of several important conclusions:

- that certain forms of violence are difficult to identify, particularly in cases when there are no traditionally recognizable signs of abuse;
- that limited awareness of the broad range of acts that constitute violence may have direct implications for outcomes such as reporting;
- that little awareness of covert forms of violence may normalize their occurrence and trivialize the magnitude of the psychological consequences for the victim.

Ultimately, the female political party women who participated in this research expressed a willingness, regardless of party affiliation, to prevent, educate, and protect women.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) defines violence against women (VAW) as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.’ This definition contests customary or common misconceptions that violence against women is strictly physical or sexual “violence” or contained in the home as a private matter. Around

the world, dialogue and actions to address VAW have significantly increased. However, the topic is often taboo and misunderstood in societies where conservative and patriarchal cultures continue to determine gender-based roles.

There is also growing international awareness of acts of violence and harassment against women in politics, recognizing the convergence of violence and women's public participation and how VAW impacts democratic processes. VAW in politics is an act of gender-based violence aimed at women because they engage in political action, such as running as candidates for elected office, participating in political parties, working as election officials, or attending campaign events. VAW in politics includes acts of coercion or using force or threats to influence individuals' participation, which has more significant impact on women because of their marginalized and vulnerable status in their communities.

Given the dearth of information and research on VAW in politics, the National Democratic Institute has prioritized research, dialogue and action to eliminate VAW against women in politics.

In 2016, NDI launched the #NotTheCost campaign - a global call to action to raise awareness to stop violence against women in politics. The campaign's title reflects the fact that many women are told that harassment, threats, psychological abuse (in person and online), physical and sexual assault are "the cost of doing politics." For the last few years, NDI has been working to challenge this claim by raising awareness of the violence that politically-active women face, collecting data on it, and building capacity among our partners to mitigate its impact and hold perpetrators to account.

This report is the result of research conducted for NDI North Macedonia as part of NDI's global action. NDI North Macedonia decided to do this research based on the increasing number of women politicians raising their voice about experiencing or witnessing violence against women in politics. There have been discussions that the violence against women in politics is not recognized as such, that it is widely spread, that perpetrators go unpunished, and that it has negative effects on the participation of women in politics. NDI North Macedonia aimed to get first hand knowledge of what the situation in political parties really is and to promote dialogue on priority issues to improve policies and/or institutional protocols related to discrimination, violence, and intimidation against women in political processes.

Methodology

This research was launched by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to assess manifestations and practices of violence against women in political parties in North Macedonia. The Ohrid Institute conducted the research and drafted the initial report. This report was reviewed and finalized by Francesca Binda, President of Binda Consulting International. In selecting the political parties for participation in the assessment, the researchers applied special considerations to ensure a broad and accurate representation. Such considerations were the ethnic diversity of the domestic political landscape and the parties' relevance to the country's political-electoral stage. As a result, NDI selected ten political parties equally representing the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian political blocs. These are listed below¹ as follows:

- Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)
- VMRO – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)
- Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)
- Alliance for Albanians (AA)
- Alternativa (Alternativa)
- Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)
- Movement BESA
- Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM)
- Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)
- New Social Democratic Party (NSDP).

The research took place from June to August 2020. Data collection was delayed by the advent of early parliamentary elections held on July 15, 2020. Therefore, key research participants were occupied in election campaigning for three weeks before the elections and unavailable to participate in the research. However, the short time between the election process and focus group discussions enabled multiple participants to evoke and share fresh perspectives and experiences and thus contribute to the relevance of the discussions.

A further limitation of the research was the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated virtual and remote contact to respect NDI's guidelines on physical distancing, preventing in-person meetings. Interviews and focus groups were, therefore, conducted remotely using virtual meeting tools.

The research employed primary and secondary sources, with an emphasis on conducting a review of various documents and contact with key party stakeholders for qualitative inquiry. The qualitative research tools used are part of the methodology and materials developed by NDI within the framework of its global initiatives, *Win with Women: Global Action Plan* and *No Party to Violence: Assessing Violence Against Women in Political Parties*.

Surveys

Researchers designed a comprehensive, 40-question survey for women and a 27-question survey for men. A total of 200 party members independently responded to the online survey between July 1 and 10, 2020. In cooperation with the political parties, NDI identified geographically and ethnically representative respondents of each party's membership.

The surveys explored party members views and perceptions of:

- The acceptability of aberrant interpersonal behaviors within the party;

¹ The parties are listed in the order of the latest elections results in the Early Parliamentary Elections 2020

- Challenges and barriers related to the advancement of women within the political party;
- The vulnerability of women in various positions within the party; and
- Experience, understanding, recognition, and acceptance of political violence against women

	Political Party	Women	Men	Total
<i>Surveys</i>	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)	10	10	20
	VMRO – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)	10	10	20
	Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)	10	10	20
	Alliance of Albanians (AA)	10	10	20
	Alternativa (Alternativa)	10	10	20
	Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)	10	10	20
	Movement BESA	10	10	20
	Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM)	10	10	20
	Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	10	10	20
	New Social Democratic Party (NSDP).	10	10	20
	100	100	200	

The annex to this report provides the full answers from both surveys. Where the questions are the same or similar, the responses are shown in one table to enable easy comparison. The questions that are different are presented in separate tables. In each table, the number of respondents and the percentage of responses are provided.

In-depth Interviews

Between June 22 and July 04, 2020, researchers conducted 20 remote in-depth interviews with female and male leaders of political parties. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Most of the women interviewed were presidents of their party's women's branch. Male respondents were senior party leaders (vice president, secretary-general, or head of the party's research center).

	Political Party	Women	Men	Total
<i>In-depth Interviews</i>	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)	1	1	2
	VMRO – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)	1	1	2
	Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)	1	1	2
	Alliance for Albanians (AA)	1	1	2
	Alternativa (Alternativa)	1	1	2
	Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)	1	1	2
	Movement BESA	1	1	2
	Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM)	2	0	2
	Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	1	1	2
	New Social Democratic Party (NSDP).	1	1	2
	11	9	20	

Focus Groups

Researchers conducted ten, virtual women-only, single-party focus groups between August 6 and 25, 2020, as detailed below:

	Political Party	Women	Total
<i>Focus Groups</i>	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)	11	11
	VMRO – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)	9	9
	Democratic Union for Integration (/DUI)	9	9
	Alliance of Albanians (AA)	8	8
	Alternativa (Alternativa)	8	8
	Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)	8	8
	Movement BESA	9	9
	Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM)	9	9
	Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	10	10
	New Social Democratic Party (NSDP).	8	8
	89	89	

The researchers aggregated all primary data gathered from the surveys, interviews, and focus groups and identified key thematic clusters to present the findings. To protect the privacy of all assessment participants, this report makes no attributions of any direct quotes based on party affiliation.

The analysis focuses on the three root causes of violence against women in politics, as noted in NDI’s methodology:

1. *Institutional causes*: The lack of institutional mechanisms, laws, or policies that prevent violence or threat of violence toward politically active women. This also includes the absence of laws or policies that defend victims of this violence, and of norms or structures that address violence against women within political institutions or that promote protection of women’s leadership/participation.
2. *Socio-cultural causes*: These originate from discriminatory gender norms, including those that relegate women to the private sphere and privilege men as politicians by nature. They are also based on the “normalization” of violence in general and violence against women in particular. They can include how much is known in general about violence against women in politics and whether it is socially recognized and acceptable.
3. *Individual causes*: These include whether people understand or recognize violence against politically active women, as well as refer to the lack of opportunities, knowledge or resources available to women in politics.

Context: Women's Political Representation in North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia has advanced on the issue of gender equality, especially in politics. The number of women elected to the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia has steadily grown. While there is still a long way to go to achieve equal representation in the **national legislature**, the introduction of the quota changed the political landscape in Parliament. According to Article 64 of the Electoral Code, “in all lists of candidates for Members of Parliament, submitted for parliamentary elections, at least 40 percent of the candidates must belong to the less represented gender. These candidates must be equally distributed throughout the list - on every three positions on the list, and an additional candidate from the less represented gender in each half or the lists” (Amendments of Electoral Code 2015, 44).² For illustration, in 2019, the Parliament of North Macedonia included 45 women delegates from different political parties of 120 available seats, or 38.3 percent. In 2020, the number reached 47 women delegates,³ 21 representing the SDSM Coalition (out of 46), 17 from the VMRO Coalition (out of 44), five from DUI (out of 15) and four from Coalition Alliance/ Alternativa (out of 12).

Absent legal requirements for executive positions, women continue to be underrepresented in **government** at the national and local levels. In the previous government of 2017, out of 22 ministries, four women held ministerial positions. In 2020, although there are fewer ministries, four women remain in ministerial positions (15.3 percent of the cabinet). According to a 2019 study on women's political participation in North Macedonia,⁴ the government failed to implement its 2017-21 program on equal gender representation. The government only appointed 19 women (or 11.18 percent) to high governmental functions. Women accounted for only 25 percent of general directors or state secretaries (four in number).

The new Electoral code also brought increased women's representation on the **local level**. Even though there is progress in the percentage of women councilors in local municipal councils, there are only six women mayors out of 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje (81 total). In the 2017 local elections, out of 260 candidates for mayor, only 15 were women; a slight increase from 2013, when only four women were elected mayor (26 women candidates out of 339 candidates). Women currently lead 15 of 81 municipal councils.

Context: Women's Participation in Political Parties in North Macedonia

As the gatekeepers for political aspirants, political parties are struggling in their efforts to achieve equal representation in organizations' internal bodies. Three political parties have a woman leader (DOM, PEP21, and Voice for Macedonia). Men lead all other active political parties, although women do serve as deputy or vice presidents of eight parties. Only VMRO-DPMNE does not have a woman on the highest leadership level, despite having two vice presidents (males).

The Executive Committee of VMRO-DPMNE has a total of 25 members, out of which five are women. SDSM's highest organ, the Executive Board, contains 16 members out of which nine are women. In NSDP's highest organ, the Executive Board, out of 21 members, eight are women. The Executive Board of LDP comprises 18 members, out of which four are women. BESA's highest organ is the Central Leadership, which has 24 members, out of which six are women. Out of eight

² http://aa.mk/WBStorage/Files/izboren_zakonik.pdf

³ <https://www.sobranie.mk/segashen-sostav-2020-2024.nspix>

⁴ [Women's Political Participation in North Macedonia](#)

key leadership positions in Alliance, two are held by women. DPA's Central Leadership has a total of 30 members, out of which seven are women. DUI has the lowest representation of women in its central leadership, as four out of 40 members are women. DOM leads the political parties in female representation, as 11 out of 19 members of its Executive Board are women.

Almost all political parties in North Macedonia have separate internal structures for women as a "union," "organization," "assembly," or "forum" of women, and the other parties are in the process of establishing these structures. These bodies are articulated in the parties' written statutes. The existence of such bodies, within the party structure, is viewed by many as essential for the strengthening of women's voices in the Macedonian society and to improve women's political participation. The main purpose of these structures is to increase public awareness, discuss and propose gender-related regulations within the parties on both local and national levels, and take specific action for the affirmation of women on a social and political scale.

The women's sections of all political parties actively engage in high profile activities to promote women's participation in politics and highlight issues related to gender, often with the explicit and public support of party leadership. All of the women sections within the political parties have active local branches, playing critical roles in gender sensitization of party members and capacity building of women with grassroots activities, organizational and supportive functions on the local level, especially in elections. For example, the two biggest parties' women's organizations have the widest spread networks of local structures, with branches in almost every municipality.

The Women's Union of VMRO-DPMNE is committed to strengthening women leaders' capacity within the party on a local level. The party has established a commission for gender equality and gender-sensitive issues. Regulations of the SDSM mandate the party's Forum of Women to promote equality, political activity, status and the involvement of women within the party and on a national level in all spheres of their social and economic life. Furthermore, the Forum has called for 50 percent representation of women on candidate lists for parliamentary elections. From its structures, it has a female Deputy President and one woman Vice President of the party (out of the four). LDP's Forum of Women promotes equal representation and leadership advancement by implementing two-year term limits for the forum's positions. It has equal representation of women of its structures on the highest party leadership-two women vice presidents out of the four. The Women Organization of NSDP has mandated a minimum of 30 percent representation in all the party's bodies, which was later added in the Statute. The party has two women vice-presidents out of three total.

BESA has not yet formalized its Women's Forum (scheduled for the next party congress), although functionally, it has five regional coordinators and local branches' presidents. Its Women Forum has also been vocal for pushing a 40 percent of representation of women in the party structures. BESA's President of the Women's Forum is automatically a vice president of the party (out of the four) as is the case with Alternativa, whose pending Statute of the Women Forum will be formalized in its upcoming Congress of the party. Two of the party's four vice presidents are women.

DUI's Forum of Women has a Secretariat for Equal Opportunities committed to achieving at least 40 percent of women in all party structures. Although currently there is a woman vice president of the party (out of the four total), the Statute does not stipulate that she has to be the president of the Women's Forum. DPA's Women Forum is dedicated to active and adequate participation in decision-making within the party and the government, at both local and central levels. The Women's Forum has a branch in every municipality where there is a party branch. Its president is also one of the party's vice presidents (two women out of four).

Since its establishment in 2006, women have led DOM, promoting a platform for women's equality and emancipation at the local level. DOM also has a separate Forum of Women, which selects its committees at a local level that, in turn, have the right to participate in the democratic processes of the higher bodies in the party. The Forum has a high profile within the party, participating in gender equality activities and initiating a 50 percent quota campaign for representation of women in political bodies, ministerial positions, mayors, executive boards, and other state bodies.

The Alliance for Albanians has formed an Assembly of Women, which is very vocal in activities and representation on local and national levels. In accordance with party regulations, the Assembly of Women president should also serve as a vice president of the Alliance. However, at the time of writing, this rule was not applied, which is one reason the president of the Assembly of Women resigned from all functions in the party on September 16, 2020. The reasons she gave are: not including women members of the Assembly in the party structures, not achieving representation of at least 40 percents of women in the party bodies (only three out of 30 on the central level are women) and not coordinating or consulting with the Assembly of Women when selecting [female] candidates for the lists of candidates, thus making the Assembly of Women's very existence and its president's position obsolete.

Assessment Findings: Relevant Party Documents

Researchers examined the ten political parties' documents to understand the extent to which the parties have formalized their commitment to gender equality and recognize the need to address violence. Political party statutes and codes of conduct are formal means to convey party values and guide members' behavior within the organization. While the existence of documents does not always mean standards are applied or implemented, they are a first step in developing a culture of respect, providing victims of violence official recourse. Since the concept of political violence is unknown or misunderstood among many activists in North Macedonia, a few participants referred to unwritten-verbal guidelines that promote ethical standards of democratic behavior and respect, when asked about official party guidance addressing violence against women. Of course, without written guidelines, it is impossible to verify how verbal communications are used to combat violence against women in the parties.

Party Statutes

Each of the ten political parties in North Macedonia has a statute that explains the party's central values, goals, platform, and bodies. Seven political parties have included provisions in their statutes that define their commitments to gender equality, equal gender representation or gender-based violence. More specifically, article 16 of the new statute of VMRO-DPMNE stresses that the party is fully aware of gender equality and is committed to providing equal representation of men and women in all party bodies and structures. SDSM, in article 2 of its statute, emphasizes creating and strengthening equal opportunities between men and women in North Macedonia. Its statute's article 70 calls for at least 40 percent of women's representation in all party bodies. DOM denotes, in article 1 of its statute, the right to equality for all citizens in North Macedonia, regardless of their gender. LDP's and NSDP's party statutes do not have specific written provisions regarding gender equality, referring more generally to human rights and equality. Article 41 of NSDP's statute underlines that there must be a 30 percent representation of both genders in all party bodies.

In the Alliance of Albanians (AA), there are several provisions in the statute on gender equality and equal representation for women within the party bodies. According to article 18 of the Statute, the party is dedicated to the fight for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and it is committed to women's emancipation and full gender equality. As a result, the party strives to incorporate at least 40 percent women's representation in all party bodies as stated in the statute.

Alternativa's statute emphasizes the notion of gender equality as a valuable aspect of the party's platform. The document reiterates that Alternativa will not tolerate any forms of discrimination, hatred or violence based on religion, race, ethnicity, and gender. It further continues that Alternativa will strive to protect basic human rights, respecting all international laws and treaties created to guarantee equality and freedom. The party document clearly states that it is committed to have at least 30 percent of women representatives in the highest bodies of the party (Article 58). In its statute, BESA commits to the goals of building a democratic nation and finding solutions to all forms of discrimination on a racial, religious, ethnic, and gender basis, as well as implementing the internationally recognized human rights' laws. It is clearly stated in article 9 of the statute, that BESA is committed to improving the status of women as a universal, undeniable right. Article 16 of DUI's statute focuses on improving women's political position to equally partake in the country's decision-making processes.

While DPA's statute does not mention violence against women, the Rulebook of DPA's Women's Forum has an explicit reference to violence against women. Article 5 of the Forum's Rulebook states that this body will promote activities for the prevention of organized crime, women trafficking, and all kinds of violence or illegal actions against women. The party has provisioned for 30 percent of women representation in party bodies, candidates for elections and public office holders on both local and national levels.

Although gender equality and equal representation are, on occasions, stipulated in political parties' statutes, there is no mention of violence or the protection of women from violence. Additionally, there are no mechanisms within party documents that regulate or sanction political party members and officials who commit violence.

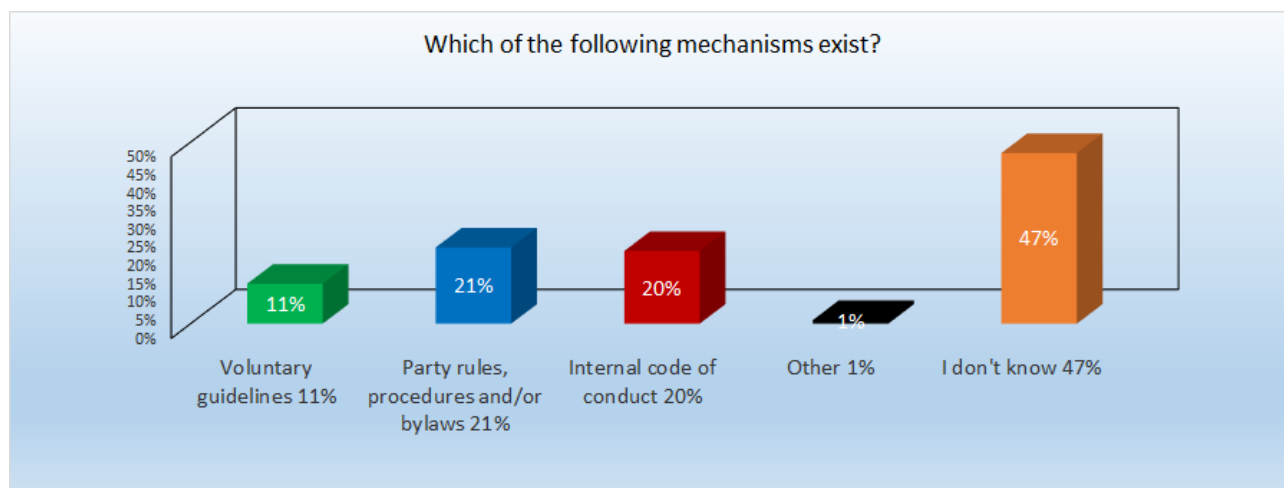
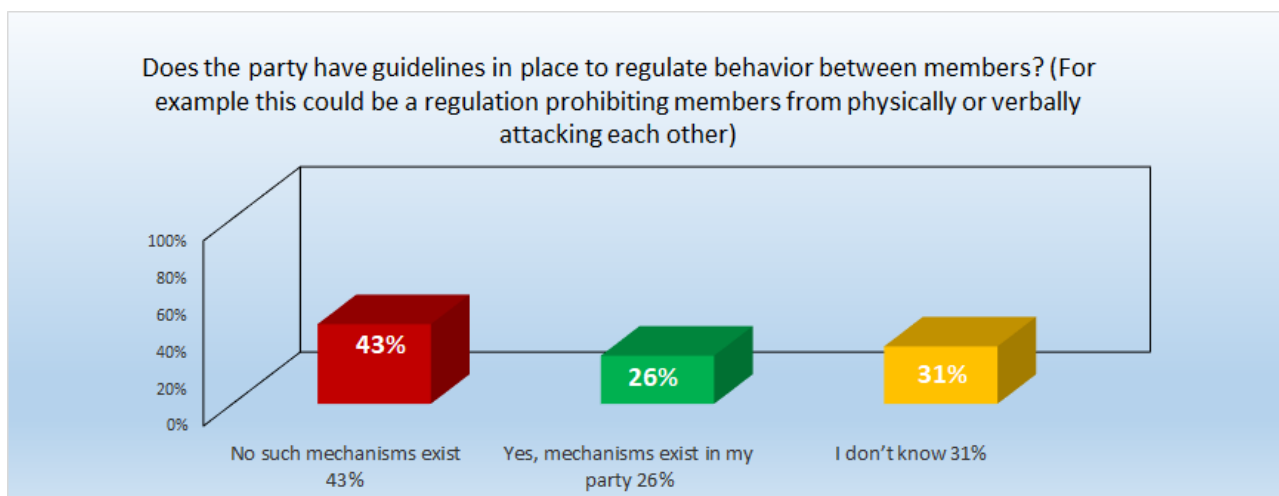
A detailed analysis of the parties' statutes regarding behaviours that lead to expulsion or sanction from the party shows that each political party has sanctions for certain types of behavior by its party members. None of the parties' proscribed sanctions mention gender-based violence, although a few stress that certain behaviors are unacceptable. VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DOM, Alliance, and DUI do not clearly define the term "inappropriate behavior" that can lead to possible membership termination. Article 12 in LDP's statute, states that the party membership will be terminated in the case where the person with his or her actions is damaging the reputation of the party. NSDP has the same terminology pertaining to the party's reputation (article 8). BESA also focuses on destructive behavior strictly connected to the party's reputation and status (article 14). Alternativa emphasizes the party's authority instead of reputation, but the reason for termination remains the same — destructive behavior that can negatively impact the party's authority (article 14). DPA uses slightly different language as the termination will ensue only in a case of a serious breach of party's regulations and obligations as a member (article 12).

Codes of Conduct

None of the ten political parties, assessed in this research, have formal codes of conduct regulating members' behavior or protecting women activists from violence. During interviews, representatives of SDSM, DOM, and LDP indicated that their parties plan to draft and introduce codes of conduct including provisions to prevent any form of violence. SDSM functionaries are obliged to sign a

Declaration of Honor before taking any post, pledging not to use insults, defamation, violence and threats, hate speech, or give false information or promises. Alternativa is the only political party that has a Code of Ethics, specifically prohibiting an official of the party to commit any sexual abuse or any act that is associated with such abuse or harassment (article 5).

Women survey respondents, and interviewees and focus group participants, were asked to reflect on party guidelines that regulate behavior among party members. This question's principal objective was to gain insight in the level of awareness of both the existence and the degree of accessibility or usefulness of intraparty mechanisms against violent interpersonal behaviours. Almost one-third (31 percent) of women who responded to the survey did not know if their party has guidelines to regulate members' behavior, and almost half (43 percent) noted that no such mechanisms exist. While 26 percent of respondents acknowledge such mechanisms exist, nearly half of them do not know how they are formalized. Additionally, 62 percent are unaware if they are accessible, useful, effective, or if and how often mechanisms are used.



The researchers also explored the existence of written documents to regulate members' behavior during the interviews and focus group discussions. There were mixed perceptions and answers (even within the same party) on whether mechanisms for regulating behavior in the form of codes of conduct or regulations in the statutes exist or how or if they are implemented or effective.

Yes, there is an internal code of conduct. Our political party has clearly defined ideology that explicitly rejects, condemns and forbids all forms of violence. Interview respondent

Internal code of conduct is currently in the drafting phase. For now it is an unwritten rule. At the moment it does not exist formally, but there are unwritten guidelines of what is acceptable and what not. Interview respondent

There is an internal code of conduct. Focus group respondent [53, rural branch]

There is an internal code of conduct that regulates verbal abuse and other types of violence directed toward women. Focus group respondent [48, urban branch]

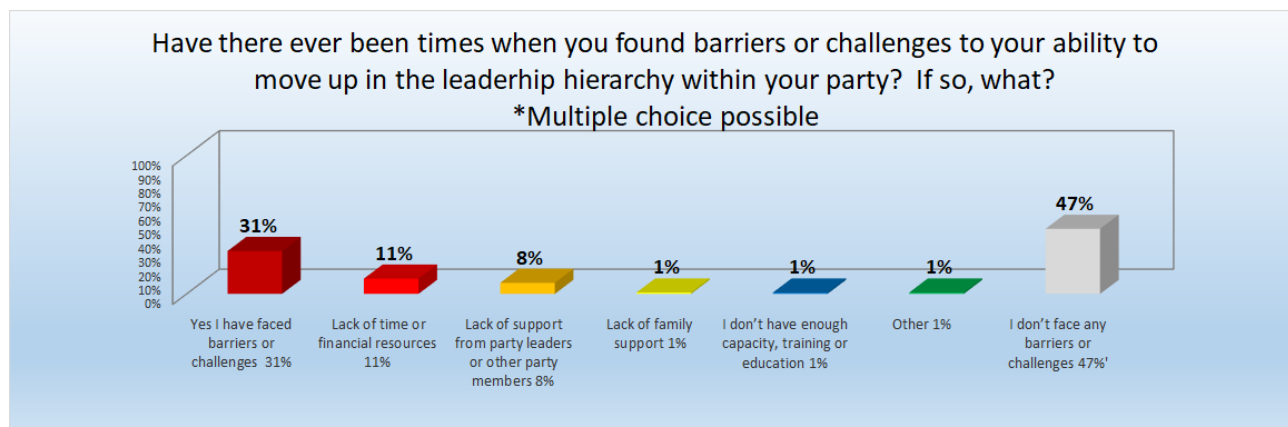
None of the political parties mention or sanction violent behavior towards women or gender-based violence in their official documents. Many of the respondents admitted that this was the first time they thought about the need to protect women in politics. Until now, harassment seemed a part of their normal political life.

Assessment Findings: Barriers to Women’s Participation in Parties

The assessment revealed that women face barriers to both participation in politics in general and to aspiring to leadership positions within their political parties. As cited by multiple respondents, the central underlying impediments to women’s political activity are the prevailing *patriarchal values* and consequent prejudices implying that women are ill-suited for active participation in the public sphere, and particularly in politics. Furthermore, the analysis of the respondents’ views indicates that patriarchal values are a complex indicator surfacing as an implicit cause of other challenges, such as *time constraints* and *lack of support from the family*.

Societal prejudice is the greatest barrier. There is a view that the women who engage [in politics] are unprincipled, have loose morals, and this potential image deters many women from political involvement. Also, before a woman enters a serious relationship or marriage, she is actively involved, as has been the case in our party; but once she enters a committed relationship or marriage, she withdraws. It is difficult to say how many women of quality we have lost after they were married. I cannot speculate on the reasons; they might be the husband and his views, the traditional role of women, the lack of time or lack of support from the family. Interview respondent

Albanian women are subject to stereotypes and prejudices that make us feel inferior both institutionally and with regard to leadership positions and, sadly, we content ourselves with our representation on MP candidate lists. It is, in a way, an internalised mindset that women of good morals should not be politically active, which affects the young women who aspire to engage in party activity. Focus group respondent [38, urban branch]



Another significant aspect that draws from patriarchal values and affects women's access to opportunities and their advancement within political parties is the **dichotomy between the public and the private**. The degree of participation in the public domain often depends on the time available and the autonomy to use it. Many women are limited in their political participation due to the socio-cultural role they are assigned in the family, which entails a lack of control over their lives.

I have 25 years of experience in politics, I have been involved ever since I was a young woman. ... I will start with the factor of time and the balance between family life and professional obligations, on top of which comes political activity. As much as we claim to live in a progressive society, the distribution of roles and responsibilities within the family still weighs heavily on the side of the woman. Thus, every time a woman decides to engage in politics, a civil society organisation, or any other form of public activity, she risks cutting into her family or personal time. Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

Although the party's leadership believes in the suitability of all roles for women, this is not a shared sentiment across the party's membership. The majority feel that a woman's place is the private, domestic sphere, that her role is to look after the home and that politics is not the place for her. Given the [societal] mindset, this is understandable. Male interview respondent

Although respondents had mixed perceptions regarding this issue's particular prevalence in provinces and rural areas, multiple focus group representatives of smaller municipal party branches agreed that their expected private roles influence their ability to participate in public life.

I represent [a municipality in the capital] and always say that it is easy to be a woman in [my political party] in this municipality; the issue of challenges and barriers to participation are perhaps more relevant in provinces, and especially rural areas, where part support and membership is a matter of common knowledge. Focus group respondent [46, urban branch]

If a woman [in a rural area] joins the party quarters, she is labelled a slut. ... When it was time to establish the women's forum in [rural area], as the forum's coordinator, I started calling women and asking them if they wanted to join. One said, "I'll give you my husband's number, speak with him; if he lets me, I'll join". He didn't let her. And this was not an isolated case. Focus group respondent [49, rural branch]

In my 26-27 years of political activism, I have concluded that women in the provinces need our support. They operate in areas where men are the absolute majority and unquestioned decision-makers. The women there are battling not only stereotypes and preconceptions imposed by men but also prejudices voiced by other women who still hold on to the outdated patriarchal adage of "what on earth are you doing meddling in politics when your place is in the home". My plea to all longstanding women activists, like myself, is to consider directing party resources not only to the advancement of the youth but also to assist women in these areas. Focus group respondent [53, urban branch]

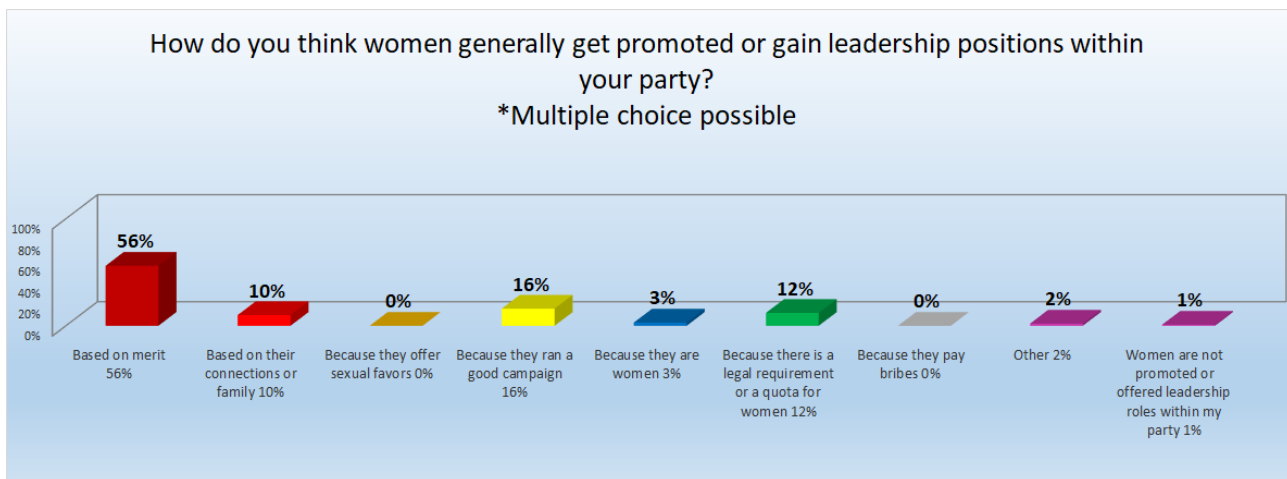
The unreserved openness with which many focus group participants shared their experiences saw the emergence of another substantive and much-discussed indicator — that of the perceived **lack of woman-to-woman support and solidarity**. In general, class, gender, ethnicity, and other divides are further accentuated when there is a lack of in-group empathy and solidarity for the discriminated. Camaraderie and solidarity among women are, therefore, key in transforming entrenched inequalities between men and women and among women themselves, and in reversing the patriarchal context of development.

My perception is that a woman will much more typically support a man than she will another woman. Focus group respondent [42, urban branch]

At the end of the day, once we have identified a problem, we should ask ourselves what our own share is as potential contributors to that problem. We [women] should really ask ourselves why we lack the cohesion and solidarity to achieve [better representation in leadership positions]. We can't lay the blame on our male party colleagues; they support each other more. Focus group respondent [39, urban branch]

In fact, women [within the party] can often act as inhibitors; they not only withdraw their support and refuse to promote the qualities and merit of a female party colleague that earn her a climb up the leadership ladder, but they actively accentuate any reasons why she shouldn't progress. Focus group respondent [56, rural branch]

Reflecting on what happened recently, when [a newly mandated male MP used hate speech in a Facebook status to criticise a woman MP], I noticed that only two women stood in her support. After reading about it, I was motivated to contribute by voicing my support as well. Focus group respondent [42, urban branch]



Socio-cultural stereotypes of women's roles inevitably inform the issue of which positions within the political party are the most suitable for them. Notably, the overwhelming majority of interview respondents agree that women can fulfill any political party role that is suitable for a male party member. Nevertheless, perceptions and experiences imparted predominantly during the focus group discussions suggest a different reality.

Only positions on candidate lists that are certain to lose [in the elections] are reserved for women. For example, when these positions were distributed to women across electoral constituencies, it was done so that women were only included where it was certain that they would not receive a mandate. Focus group respondent [29, rural branch]

The role of secretary general would perhaps be too much. This position requires a great deal of field work and a massive time investment, and would not be suitable for a woman. Across all political parties in the country, there has never been a woman in this position. Male interview respondent

We [women] are treated as a number of hands in decision-making and are viewed as ornaments to the political party; the highest position we can aspire to achieve is perhaps that of vice-president – but not leader. When it comes to men, they have a direct route to central committees and important decision-making that affects the party. Women, on the other hand, first need to take part in the women’s forum and be filtered through multiple times before one of them is placed third on the MP candidate list. This is not the case solely in our party; for example, all ministers from [rival political party] have so far been men because there is no regulation that at least one of three ministers must be a woman. ... In our [country’s] political parties, we are viewed as quantity, not as quality. Focus group respondent [55, rural branch]

This lack of political visibility, compounded with the socio-cultural values that underlie it, is frequently picked up and reproduced by the media. Respondents feel that although **(social) media coverage**, especially during the electoral period, does not limit their exposure, it helps perpetuate the patterns and stereotypes of what a “true accomplished woman” ought to be.

As we are currently in a post-election period, proposals have already been made for women ministers. I am positive the first reactions will be directed to their physical appearance, their conduct during the constitutive session; these will be followed by reminders of how ‘accomplished’ they are as wives and mothers; and maybe, at the very end, brief overviews of their past political accomplishments. This does not happen to men. Focus group respondent [48, urban branch]

We should look good; be dressed modestly but nicely and with taste; be feminine; ensure we do not react in a ‘manly’ way; mind our tone, lest we seem impulsive or aggressive. So, of course, women feel that these double standards effectively break their political advancement. Focus group respondent [44, rural branch]

The association of stereotypically masculine traits with the defining characteristics of a successful leader is by no means a novel practice in the socio-cultural matrix and, by default, in the media. Traits such as ambition, rationality, seriousness, control, assertiveness and competitiveness have prevailed in the profiling of good leadership. By contrast, these aspects are rarely associated with behaviors considered to be typically feminine: sensitivity, emotion, gentleness, affectivity. Although multiple respondents emphasized that women are, in general, “more tactful, better negotiators, less prone to bribery and less corrupt,” they are still perceived as lacking “the stomach to be leaders”. These practices are considered to discourage many women from taking on visible positions within the party or being candidates. They have a greater effect when media exposure (or exposure on social networks) may jeopardize women’s reputation and affect their personal and public lives.

Q10. Have there ever been times when you found barriers or challenges to your ability to move up in the leadership hierarchy within your party? If so, what? Multiple choice answers	
Answer	Percentage 100%
I don't face any barriers or challenges	47%
Yes I have faced barriers or challenges	31%
Lack of time or financial resources	11%
Lack of support from party leaders or other party members	8%
Lack of family support	1%
I don't have enough capacity, training or education	1%
Other	1%

Assessment Findings: Violence against Women in Political Parties

The research reveals that VAW in politics and political parties is poorly understood among political activists in North Macedonia. A general observation drawn from the focus groups regarding specific experiences with incidents of violence against women in political parties is that the discussion benefited from an initial overview of the term's definition and scope and a clarification regarding the many acts that constitute violence. The researchers derived this impression from the first few focus groups. Before recounting a witnessed or experienced act of violence, several participants expressed doubts as to whether the act could even be considered a form of violence.

I have a dilemma about the topic of this discussion. ... Violence against women in political parties is a fluid category and is sometimes difficult to recognise because it does not have the traits of classic violence [emphasis added by author]; instead, we [women] face covert forms that are often expressed as intelligent interplays of stereotypes and manipulations designed to prevent women from progressing in politics. Focus group respondent [58, urban branch]

The political activists who participated in this research confirmed that several of them had, while carrying out their political party functions, experienced or witnessed common forms of VAW, including psychological violence, threats and coercion, or physical violence. In two instances, interview respondents were informally at liberty to share incidents of sexual violence within their parties, they were unwilling to recount them during interviews for this research. The reluctance to share information about sexual violence is common in traditional and conservative communities with strong patriarchal attitudes. The fear of stigma, shame, or secondary victimization often means victims are silent about the violence and decide against seeking support or reporting incidents.

The specific incidents of violence reported in the interviews and focus groups reveal that VAW in North Macedonian politics ranges from psychological to physical violence. These incidents include:

- Dissemination of intimate or personal details and images on social media, later picked up and further shared by online news platforms.
- Defamation by creating photo-montages and publishing them on impersonating profiles on social media (Facebook and Instagram).
- Physical confrontation (shoving).
- Bullying.
- Harassment of close family members including, physical following, verbal in-person and social media threats.
- Bullying in the workplace as a result of political/party affiliation or public stance
- Online and offline hate speech.
- Insults labelling a woman's political participation as an immoral practice.
- Discriminatory treatment on the part of the mass media: calling into question their personal life, their sexual behaviour, their physical appearance, their attire.

Different manifestations of the three most frequently cited categories of violence are exemplified in the illustrative quotes below:

Psychological violence:

I have suffered various slings of abuse for raising my voice about the concerning social realities in my environment. Most recently, private photographs of me and my husband were manipulated and shared on social media without our consent. The insults and hate speech in the comments were unbearable. To make matters worse, they were picked up and featured on some online news sites. Focus group respondent [43, urban branch]

Threats and coercion:

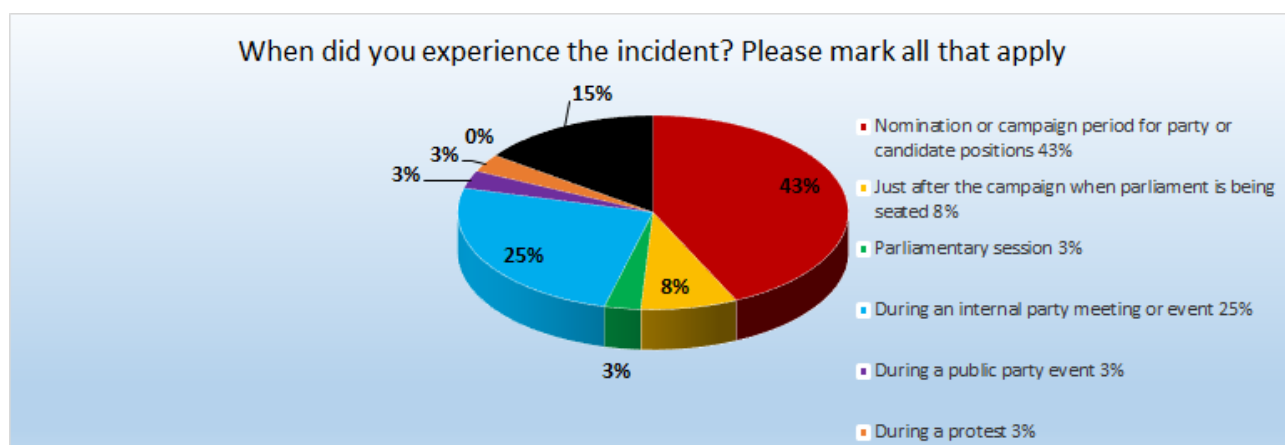
In the period before MPs were to cast their votes on the [country's] name change, some MPs experienced blackmail and anonymous threats to the lives of their families, with obituaries and everything. Female interview respondent [55, urban branch]

While I was running for Mayor of [municipality in the capital], my inbox was inundated with images of eyes, with messages such as “watch out” or “I’m watching you”. Focus group respondent [58, urban branch]

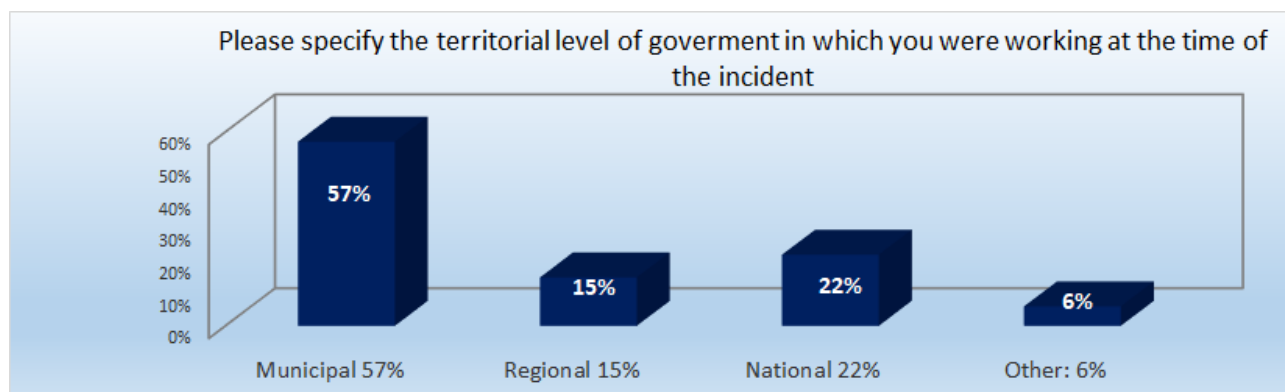
Physical violence:

I was attacked at the city council while attempting to record the proceedings. I was fortunate not to suffer any injuries – I got away with a ripped shirt sleeve – but I was massively upset that, out of the 50 people present in the room, only one person saw what happened. I was especially shocked at the lack of reaction from journalists – people who typically see everything. Focus group respondent [46, urban branch]

Regarding the *circumstances* of incidents, while most respondents agree that the whirlpool of the election campaign or other significant political events (e.g. significant votes, nominations for internal party or external candidate positions) are common catalysts for violent acts, calmer times do not mean an absence of violence. The focus group participants agree that cyber violence, in all of its forms, is an ongoing issue that perpetuates itself on every occasion when a woman politician speaks out to voice her own or her party’s views, thus “drawing renewed attention to herself”.



Asked which role or party position they held when violence occurred, the women respondents identified their local environment as the first place where they encountered incident[s] of violence.



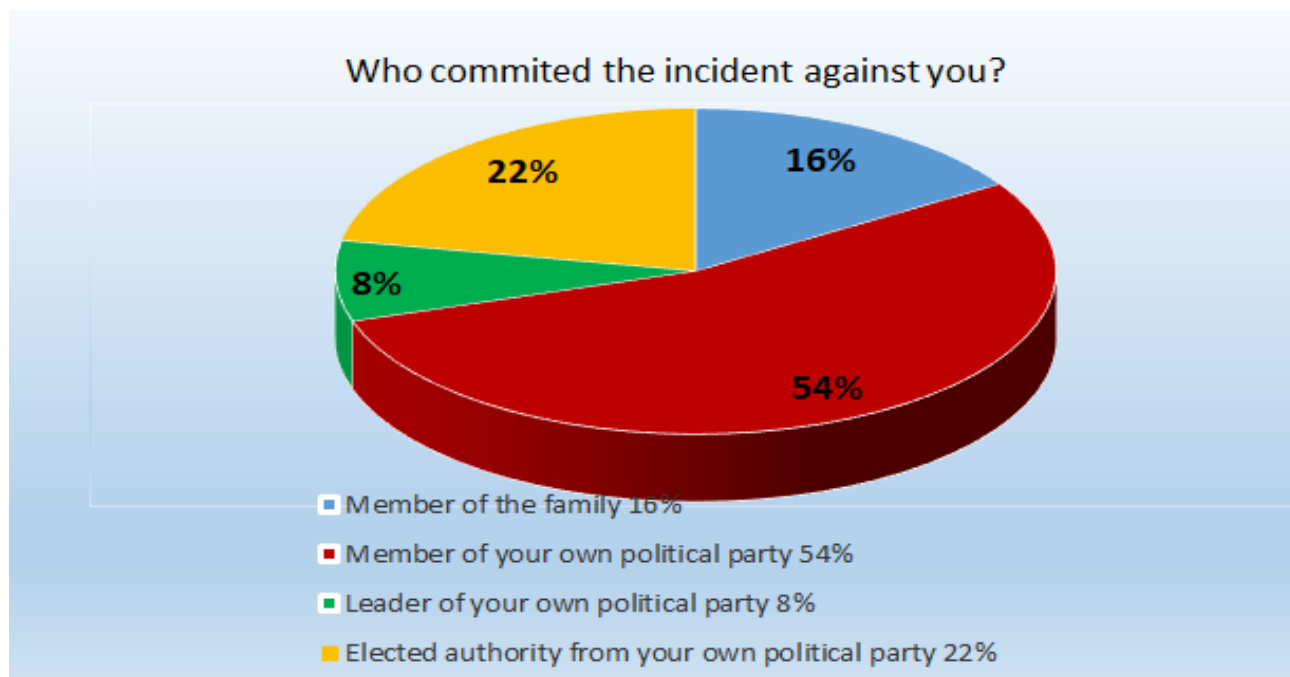
In terms of the *perpetrators*, there is a pattern of similarities in the variety of those responsible for exercising violence against women politicians:

- Men from the same political party with conflicting ideologies,
- Men from rival political parties protecting party interests,
- Higher-ranking members of the same political party,
- Internal or external party activist clusters exercising violence from webs of fake social media profiles,
- Men and women from a rival party in supervisory roles in the workplace.
-

Our member municipal councilor in [municipality in the province] has been verbally attacked multiple times by a male councilor from an opposing party, only because she raised her voice for the real municipal problems. Also, the same woman had private family pictures shared in social media with insults and threats. Focus group respondent [57, urban branch]

I've been directly exposed to abuse of power by the supervisors in my workplace, in order to ban my freedom of expression and speech, as well as directly restricting my rights to perform my daily work duties. Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

I witnessed the woman leader of my municipal organization being threatened. I experienced lynch by a crowd during protest, insults and spitting, and that was from women. It was all because of the political positions I represent. Focus group respondent [48, urban branch]



A prominent perception about the perpetrators was that in cyber violence (harassment, hate speech, defamation, and threats on social media), perpetrators were often organized groups of party activists or supporters campaigning from several fake profiles (in two instances, the respondents estimated this number to be approximately 70 profiles).

I knew these people were very organised and had this NASA-like equipment in the places from which they were operating. Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

A member of our forum [former candidate in elections] was bullied online just because she criticized [some of the] policies of [her own] party. After the elections the same person was insulted and sexually harassed online and when she publicly disclosed the messages, she was victim to even greater online violence and montaged photographs of her. Focus group respondent [29, rural branch]

These reports indicate a potential cultivation of cybergang mentality. The speed of information and the scope of diffusion magnify the impact.

Notwithstanding the perpetrators identification as both women and men, it is essential to note the perpetrator's relationship to the respondent. Respondents reported cases of family [relatives and friends] coercion pertaining to the victim's political activism, local branch leaders of coalition parties, other, non political actors that resent the victim's political activism. Reportedly, the intention is to exclude the woman from the political arena or discourage her political activity and voice to the point where her career and reputation is slandered and she is forced to withdraw.

I have been witness of violence between members of close family who belong to different political parties. It influenced family relations, cutting family ties and aggravating animosity. Focus group respondent [63, urban branch]

After 12 years of career in [social field] when I entered politics I faced judgement and discouragement from my surroundings. They were saying-why did you enter politics, you have capacity, abilities, moral values, you are not for politics. But I wanted to do something good for everybody, so I stayed. Focus group respondent [42, rural branch]

Part of the comments I heard when I decided to actively participate in politics were directed to my husband – "everyone will have your woman, why do you let her go where all the men gather, beautiful women should not be in politics". As a family we did put up with a lot of pressure and threats back then. Focus group respondent [46, rural branch]

Impact of and reporting on violence against women in political parties

Several party leadership officials interviewed for this assessment suggested that political parties' problems are part of a larger, societal dilemma. However, they also believe they are unable to change "the bigger picture." An element of violence is embedded in North Macedonian culture, requiring action from multiple stakeholders.

We as a country, especially as political parties, have systemic problems with violence in politics, especially toward women. It represents a great barrier for entering politics; with consequences for the reputation of the women, but also for the reputation of the parties. Interview respondent

The society in general is a problem. There are double standards and it became normal. It is a limitation to women's participation in politics. There is an opinion that a male can remain minister even with mistakes and flaws, but if it is a woman, there is no tolerance, she is immediately disqualified from politics. Interview respondent

Party leaders interviewed for this research acknowledge the effects violence against women has on their work in the party, undermining the many benefits women's participation brings. Asked to contemplate the impact of the violence on the women individually and on the party itself, it was

evident that there is awareness regarding the short-term and long-term effects of violence on women politicians and the political parties. Respondents mentioned the impact on the working environment within the party, effects on the political leadership, image and reputation, the participation and activation of female members, party members' ambitions, self-esteem, participation and visibility, and the impression on aspiring members, or recruitment of young cadres. However, the majority of respondents did talk about "a party," "generally speaking," not linking the effects of violence to their own political party.

A violence in the parties would have a negative effect on the women members, but also on the whole party as well, even causing them to lose the elections and the female memberships.

Interview respondent

Of course, if there was a violence, that would have a detrimental effect both on the leadership of the party and on the membership; it would create an aversion toward politics and withdrawal of membership and losing trust in the party, resulting with catastrophic consequences.

Interview respondent

A violence would also impact the ideology set of the parties.

If there would be violence toward women in the party, it would result in immediate effect, turning them against the party and asking for responsibility. **Interview respondent**

If there would be a violence toward women in the party, it would have immediate domino effect on the other women members and it can endanger the position, even the functioning of the party itself. **Interview respondent**

In a minority of cases, respondents acknowledged an adverse effect from cases of violence toward women politicians within their political party. Comments by respondents suggest transparency and immediate action by leadership play a crucial role in party members' perception of the party's ability to respond to violence.

Yes, there were effects in terms of fear and a feeling that women are not protected, but the fact that the leadership did not stand silent and cover the cases up, did turn the negative effects into positive, both for the victims and the other members as well. **(Interview respondent)**

No matter how painful it is to talk about these cases within the party, we've always insisted on a culture of open communication. **(Interview respondent)**

The assessment suggests that the **impact of violence on women politicians** can be profound: first and foremost, on a personal level, women are experiencing violence while acting on behalf of their respective political parties or because they are in a political party. It is detrimental to the victim's mental health and general well-being, especially if they feel they don't have the much-needed support.

It had influenced my health, my family, relationship with my husband, my children were subjected to pressures and judgements because of me. I feared for my life and the lives of my family. I didn't know how far it would go; but I had nothing to lose [politically] and no choice but to continue to fight. **Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]**

Women politicians are subject to mobbing and lynch in the public- they are constantly monitored for every detail from their looks and clothes, hair and attitude. It is so psychologically terrible,

unbearable, that is why so many of them are demotivated. Focus group respondent [46, urban branch]

I experienced pain, I was psychologically hurt and I'm certain that if we continue [working] in these conditions we will not have any women in politics. Focus group respondent [45, urban branch]

Additionally, being subjected to constant pressure and the threat of violence can damage the victims' freedom of expression, foster self-censorship, limit the victims' economic autonomy and prevent the victims' full participation in public life.

In hindsight, I place a lot of the blame on myself for posting what I did [on social media]. I have absolutely no ill feelings for the reactions I received or the people who reacted – many of them are still my close friends. But I definitely think twice and second-guess myself before posting anything now. Focus group respondent [39, urban branch]

I quit my job before I learned that I was going to be let go. I quit because it had become unbearable. Focus group respondent [26, urban branch]

The council [where the violence took place] is a community of mixed ethnicities where, out of 31 participants, 10 are women. They are normally voiceless; imagine how motivated they would be to speak out after what happened to me. Focus group respondent [46, urban branch]

There are unfortunate instances in [other] political parties where we know a number of highly competent women have been knocked down and it affected the decisions of other women who wanted to join the party. Focus group respondent [44, rural branch]

The respondents manifest awareness that the impact of the violence toward women spans across party lines, but conclude that in politics, one must be prepared to face severe pressures. The internalization of the root causes of violence geared toward women has yet another effect on politically active women's self-esteem and motivation, resulting in temporary or permanent withdrawal from politics.

It is very unfortunate that we have seen women from the other political parties, who had capacity and professionalism but still got ruined politically, which undoubtedly had influence on other women who considered joining [a] political party. Focus group respondent [58, urban branch]

It is unfortunate, but in our society we have continuous prejudices and attacks which influence and demotivate politically active women. It also influences other women who aspired to take on an active role in a political party, any political party. Focus group respondent [42, urban branch]

Everybody who is prepared to enter politics should be aware and ready for the pressure that comes with the position. Focus group respondent [63, urban branch]

When I am attacked, I always wonder, what did I do to provoke this attack toward me. I realize we are all from different backgrounds and we might get misunderstood. Focus group respondent [44, rural branch]

Notwithstanding, the accounts also suggest that the dominant mechanism of **dealing with** the aftermath of specific incidents is perseverance, voiced by many respondents as an unfaltering commitment to their political affiliation and their mission within their party.

The psychological impact is undeniable, but we have managed to overcome it by believing in our potential. We are intellectuals and will always be vocal about our rights and career merits in the face of countless attempts to exclude us from the political scene. Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

I temporarily withdrew from politics. But I couldn't stand aside voiceless for a long time. Focus group respondent [39, urban branch]

I did not quit [politics], I dedicated my work in the party structures, working on stopping discrimination. Focus group respondent [39, rural branch]

Several respondents noted that one factor helping them deal with violence is the “wind in one’s back” — the solidarity and support offered by fellow women politicians. This factor is vital in fostering allyship and camaraderie, promoting constructive working relationships based on shared interests, and sending a positive message to the party’s women and prospective women party members. Solidarity and support often come from women in different parties.

Perversely enough, the incident had a positive effect on other women in the party in that it strengthened the sense of community and belonging among them. It was also beneficial that it raised long-disguised questions about the women's roles in the party. Female interview respondent

I received massive support from my [women] comrades, who were happy to discuss options in terms of what actions I could take. ... It was the encouragement from my female colleagues that motivated me out of silence and passivity. Focus group respondent [45, urban branch]

It meant a lot to me, the silent and private messages of support I received, seeing that these things happen also to other women from political parties made me stubborn and determined to be vocal. Focus group respondent [46, urban branch]

The assessment suggests a correlation between victim experiences and **reporting patterns**. The general perceptions among participants are that reporting is low, predominantly due to the following:

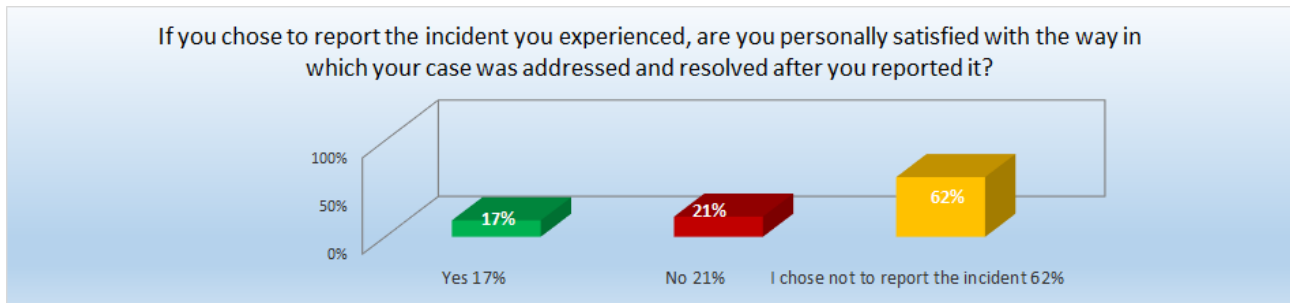
- A lack of trust in the presence or effectiveness of legislature and the state’s mechanisms,
- A fear of ‘provoking’ an escalation of the violence, and
- A fear of negative publicity, shaming, and social stigmatization (secondary victimization).

The limited awareness of the broad range of acts that violence incorporates, may constitute another implicit reason for the cited low reporting levels of reporting. Although they usually recognize most of the different forms of violence as such, the respondents often state that it is all part of the game of politics.

I thought it is all normal; since you have decided to enter politics you should be ready for all sorts of things, it's just how politics is made; you have to toughen up. Focus group respondent [48, urban branch]

The notion that one has to “toughen up” and endure whatever one encounters in politics is common

across party lines. Whatever the incident, the first resolution is sought within the close circle of the party. Over two-thirds of survey respondents (68 percent) stated they would seek a resolution within the party leadership. Many women who participated in the research noted they did not even report incidents of violence. Over one-quarter of respondents said that, at the time, they did not recognize the experience as violent, while others stated they believed it was normal for such behavior to occur in political parties.



Some determinants are the lack of support, the judgement and stigmatisation by the victim's environment, doubts about what the outcome will be. My first question was, will I achieve anything constructive [by reporting] or will I just kindle myself a bigger fire? Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

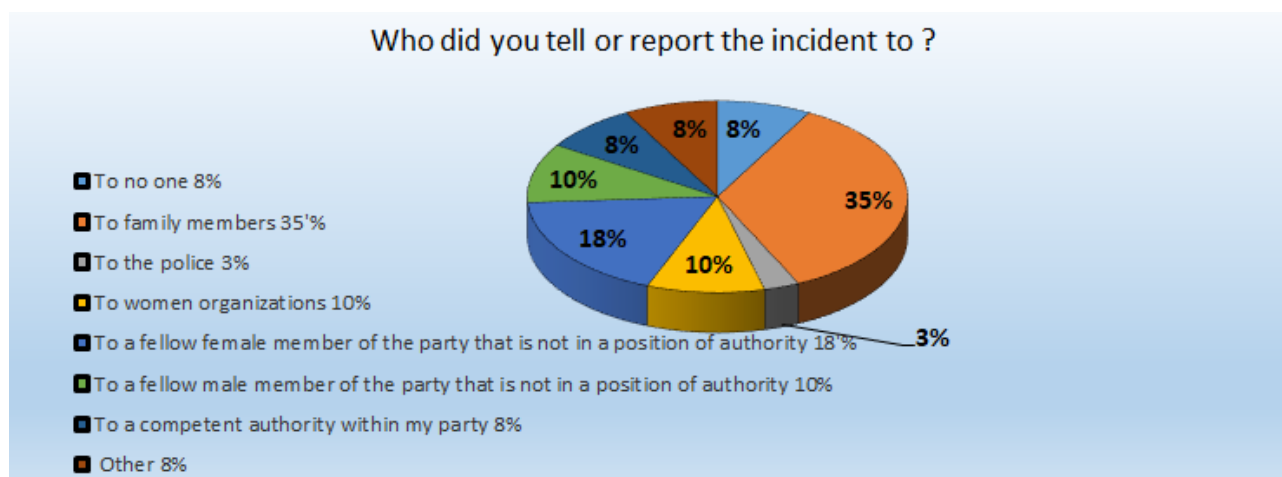
My first question was, what is next? I knew that there is a special unit within the Ministry of Interiors dealing with cybercrime – but what are their specific actions, measures? This is exactly why most women are discouraged from reporting, because the procedure is unclear. Focus group respondent [45, urban branch]

Everything is so politicised; what if he [the perpetrator] is a prominent party activist? I have yet to hear of anybody being sanctioned. And we see what happens on social media day in, day out. After all, we all have families; also as activists, we place a great deal of importance in maintaining a good reputation and dignified self-presentation. So we don't report. Focus group respondent [49, rural branch]

When women reported violence, they confided in close party members, the party leadership, or reported the incident to the police. The shared responses vary in terms of outcomes. However, many respondents' general sentiment was that a status quo was maintained wherein the case was not prioritized or taken further by the authorities.

While [the party] does not have mechanisms to exclude a member on the basis of their ideologies, the assailants were banned from the party's managing bodies and there is an ongoing court case against them. **Interview respondent**

I reported my case [of online violence] to the police; when I requested updates, I was told that the group of people I had reported were discovered to operate from foreign countries and there was thus very little to be done. That was that. **Focus group respondent [45, urban branch]**
 I reported to the police, they suggested I file a private lawsuit, and I did, but the public prosecution did not open a case. Nothing happened to this day. **Focus group respondent [26, urban branch]**

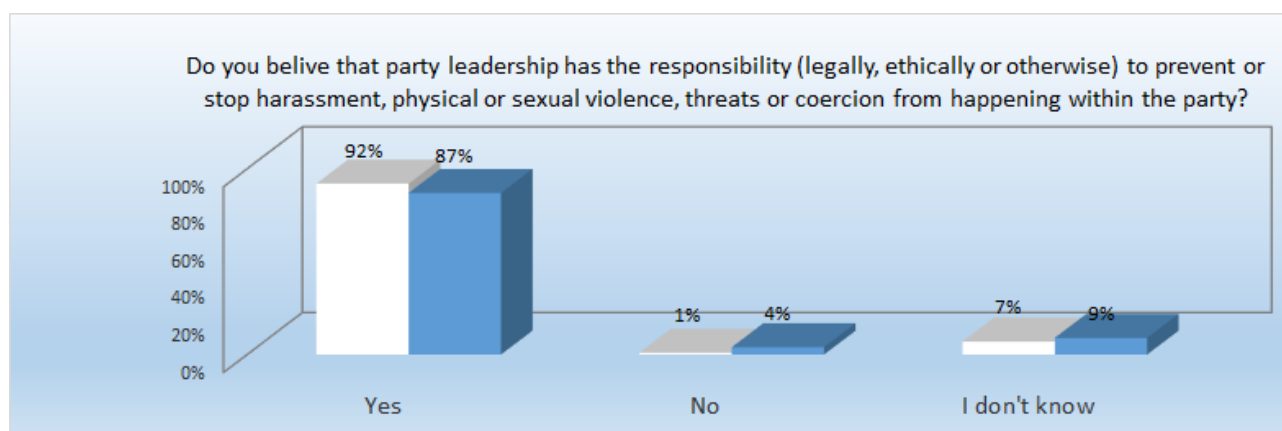


Were there any consequences for the perpetrator(s)? Please mark all that apply.				
Answer	WOMEN respondents		MEN respondents	
	percentage(%)	Count(N)	percentage(%)	Count(N)
There were not any consequences for the perpetrator(s)	63%	17	25%	25
The perpetrator was reprimanded in private	18%	5	2%	2
The perpetrator was reprimanded in public	0%	0	0%	0
The perpetrator was kicked out of the party	0%	0	2%	2
The perpetrator had to apologise	4%	1	4%	4
It caused the perpetrator to lose position or influence, or be ostracized by the party	0%	0	1%	1
The perpetrator was sanctioned	0%	0	1%	1
It caused the perpetrator to be covered in a negative way by media, including online, social, radio	4%	1	2%	2
Other	11%	3	7%	7
I don't know	0%	0	56%	56

As shown in the table, the same question regarding the impact on the perpetrator or the resolution of the incident of violence toward women politicians yielded different results in female and male respondents. In contrast, the majority of the men did not know whether there were consequences or not. The majority of women reported that there were no consequences for the perpetrator(s).

Responsibility for preventing violence against women

In general, the majority of the respondents believe that the *party leadership* bears the primary responsibility for preventing and dealing with the various forms of violence within their parties, and also rival political parties.



To feel protected, political party members rely on the uppermost party echelons for instructions, adequate and comprehensive mechanisms to monitor and control behavior, and functional management bodies. Respondents for this research identified a lack of internal mechanisms and structures addressing violence against women in politics, suggesting that political parties are not paying sufficient attention to this complex issue. In isolated instances, a small group of people within the leadership circle has dealt with violence, contained it, and resolved it in as private or “discrete” a manner as possible to maintain the good image of the party. The general perception was hence that many members did not have any knowledge of such cases’ existence.

If a violent incident takes place, the leadership must get actively involved and condemn the event unequivocally so as to discourage any future violent incidents. Focus group respondent [57, urban branch]

The party leadership has a tremendous responsibility; but I believe a lot of it lies in the successful prevention of violence and the implementation of a lead-by-example approach. Focus group respondent [45, urban branch]

The party is not responsible for personal issues and conflicts between party members. Interview respondent

The party leadership should always be held accountable. When I joined the political party I was told that I’ll never be alone and that I have the party always behind me [for support]. That was crucial for me. Interview respondent

Many respondents believe the onus is on the party leadership to provide legal and media protection to all members acting or speaking on behalf of the party. Respondents noted that political parties often provide legal advice and assistance in defamation cases, but similar support does not exist to protect women from violence. Furthermore, in most cases, women were left to deal with the issue alone, privately, or were sidelined and left alone.

The women politicians need to feel safe and protected when acting on behalf of the parties. It is the leadership' role to provide protection from any type of harassment Focus group respondent [45, urban branch]

I expected a lot from my party leadership. But the result was cooling of the relations and shutting communication [not only] from members of the party but also friends. The effect was deep on my political and personal life. Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

When asked about ways to combat violence against women within political parties, the respondents focus on parties' regulations. They suggest mechanisms should be in place for prevention, but also to sanction improper behavior. An accent is put on guidance on properly addressing the issues, grouped by theme and type of violence.

\The respondents are uniformly vocal that an effective fight against VAW in politics requires a synergy between all actors and a certain level of political maturity. Regulations, coupled with sanctions, is the desired path. However, there are currently no institutions or mechanisms that can effectively deal with this issue. Inclusive education on violence against women in politics is also necessary to diminish the stereotypes and prejudices to create an atmosphere of trust and gender sensitivity.

In our country we do have laws and regulations, but unfortunately they are non-functional and that is why many women politicians do not report incidents, or when they report, they are left with no answer from the institutions. Focus group respondent [53, urban branch]

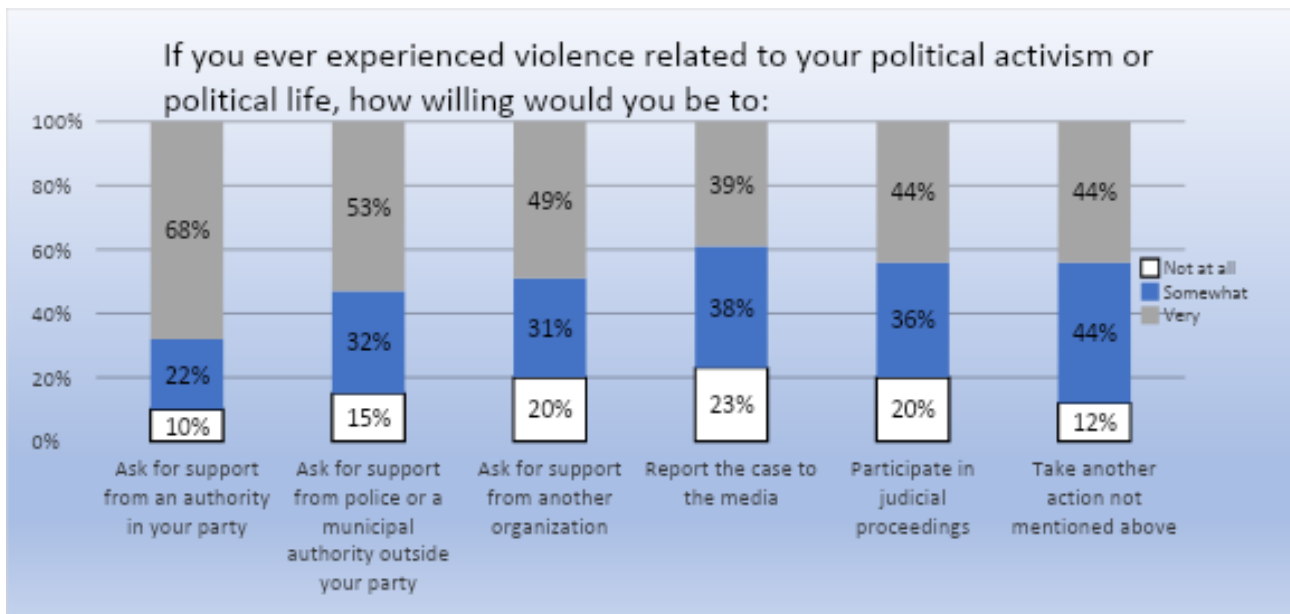
The institutions did not engage properly to resolve my case [bullying in the workplace due to political activism]. Focus group respondent [26, urban branch]

I'm not aware of any regulation that protects politically active women from [different types of] violence, not in politics, not even in society. Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

I think there need to be proper laws for protection especially for the women politicians, because it will automatically apply to the political parties. If we wait for every party to prepare regulations for their own members, there will not be a uniform solution for everyone, plus no guarantees that they will be followed by everyone. Focus group respondent [42, urban branch]

There should be rules within every party. First we should work on our internal relations and behaviours and then everything else. In every political party there should be regulations, rulebooks and codes, then a law, secondary regulations, and not to forget, a wide education for all the politicians. Focus group respondent [58, urban branch]

Except for political party leaderships, participants identified several other stakeholders besides the "obvious actors" such as the **judiciary**, the **police** and the **media** who share responsibility for addressing violence against women in political parties. When asked how willing they would be to report the violence they have experienced to different authorities, most women politicians categorize the above mentioned actors. However, a staggering 44 percent would take another action or would not act whatsoever. A likely reason for inaction is the unsatisfactory manner in which cases are dealt with, particularly the lack of consequences for perpetrators.



In some respondents' views, *the Parliamentary Women's Club* might be a key agent in initiating changes to existing legislation to become more inclusive of forms of violence and specific measures for their prevention and sanction. Additionally, relevant ministries, such as the *Ministry of Labour and Social Policy*, and particularly *non-governmental organizations*, were singled out as key influencers in creating educational and public outreach projects. The general lack of awareness — even among politically active women — demonstrates combatting violence against women in politics requires a multi-pronged approach with all stakeholders.

There needs to be strict regulation that will apply only to politically active women, but also laws that will more seriously regulate the abuse, insults and violence, starting from the police, courts, prosecution, inspection and organizations of women. Focus group respondent [49, rural branch]

There are laws that regulate discrimination and domestic violence, but there is no law or regulation protecting women in politics directly. Also, there is the problem that women from different political parties do not support each other, which is a big minus in the fight against violence toward women in politics. Focus group respondent [62, urban branch]

Not always is the law a solution—we are also to blame, we have politicised institutions, dysfunctional judiciary and no support from each other as women politicians. Focus group respondent [39, urban branch]

I don't know where to report a violence towards a woman politician. Where to report it when it is not even considered as an offense. The violence as such is rarely reported, let alone the political one. It is hard to prove and sanction. In addition, I have no trust in the institutions that the case will be resolved. Focus group respondent [55, urban branch]

Conclusion & Recommendations

Violence against women in politics is a misunderstood and complex issue in North Macedonia. While quotas and concerted activities have helped narrow the political gender gap, political parties do not address violence against women within their parties and the political system in general. In part, this failure stems from a lack of understanding of what constitutes violence. Even many politically active women view bullying, harassment, and defamation as the price of the “rough and tumble” nature of politics. In this research, several respondents did not recognize unacceptable behavior within their party as necessarily violent compared to inappropriate behavior directed to them from outside their party. The tribal nature of political party activity makes it difficult for many to believe their own side can victimize them.

Even when research participants recognized and articulated violent incidents, they have little faith that reporting will result in consequences for perpetrators. A review of relevant parties’ documents reveals a lack of regulations and sanctions for violent behavior, meaning female victims of violence have little to no official protection. Women in political parties fear ostracization or isolation from their peers if they report violence. While conservative and traditional stereotypes affect participation levels and influence women’s roles in political parties, the impact of violence on women activists has critical implications for the integrity of democratic processes.

Meaningful discussions of gender-based violence and internal political party behavior are sensitive and challenging to conduct. However, this research’s focus group discussions revealed that women in political parties are ready to examine the causes, effects, and mechanisms to mitigate violence VAW in politics. It is evident there is willingness, regardless of party affiliation, to take actions to prevent, educate, and protect women politicians.

Recommendations

Many of the following recommendations come directly from focus group discussions and interviews with respondents in this research.

Recommendations to political parties’ leaderships

- More openness and preparedness to discuss the concept of political violence.
- Acknowledge the existence of various forms of violence [beyond their power] within their political parties.
- Publicly express the political will to tackle and adhere to political dialogue regarding the VAW in politics.
- Organize joint activities across party lines to raise awareness and prevent violence in politics, especially toward women politicians.
- Initiate internal procedures within the parties to open discussions on mechanisms to regulate the behavior of members, especially towards female members.
- Make documents that regulate behaviour between members public and accessible and educate members on their existence.
- Conduct a review of internal processes and intra-party conduct to ensure that a culture of harassment and bullying is not tolerated.

- Consider protection [legal and psychological] for the women politicians while holding public positions.
- Build a continuous culture and publicly display respect and proper conduct towards all women in politics in general, not only toward members.
- Develop a robust process for handling reported incidents within the party that meets international standards of fairness and transparency, thus creating an atmosphere of trust and encouragement for other victims to come forward.
- Establish an interdisciplinary, multi expert panel or commission comprised of political party members from different fields and expertise, ready to tackle any complaints from or incidents of violence against women party members and officials.
- Create local or regional multidisciplinary teams to work in urban and rural areas with women from different backgrounds.
- Consider sanctions and dismissal from party functions for members who engaged in different forms of violence

Recommendation to women branches and women politicians

- Raise awareness within and inform their memberships of the different types and sub-types of violence that are classified as such, so that they can recognize and report.
- Provide support and information to members on reported incidents of violence.
- Consider amendments of their women branches' bylaws to include clauses of protection of their members from violence.
- Actively promote women's solidarity and support of women victims of violence. Publicly support victims and speak out regarding different forms of violence women are facing in politics.
- Consider an inter party coalition among all women branches of the political parties for signing a declaration of ethics and joint activities to condemn violence against women in politics.
- Consider a continuous multiparty public campaign for raising the awareness of the VAW in politics.
- Adhere to joint work and promotion of women's inter-party solidarity, with showcasing positive examples of cooperation and trust.
- Use the Parliamentary Women's Club as a forum for discussion and setting rules for the cooperation and solidarity in terms of protection of women in politics, by legal or other means.
- Organize educational activities and campaigns within memberships to adequately recognize and fight different forms of violence.

Recommendations to state institutions

- Acknowledge the existence of specific forms of violence, targeting women politicians.
- Provide protection of victims of politically based violence within the state administration and in the country.
- Provide education and training to state administration to effectively recognise and properly handle cases of political violence, especially toward politically active women.

- Consider creation of mechanisms and regulation for protection of women politicians.
- Consider creation of laws or and procedures for better representation of women in leadership positions within state administration.
- Consider establishing a specialised, multi institutional body for dealing with cases and incidents of violence and aiding victims of political violence.
- Provide budget for programs and shelters on local and regional levels for victims of politically based violence, especially women.
- Consider sanctions against perpetrators of political violence.
- Sensitize the judiciary, local and regional authorities and departments of ministries and inspectorates for dealing with cases of politically and gender based violence in its many forms and manifestations [in the workplace, in elections, in private life].

Recommendations to media

- Acknowledge their key role in publicizing different forms of violence toward politically active women, the prevention and exposure.
- Acknowledge their responsibility and role in exposing stereotypes and sexist language.
- Nurture positive image of women politicians, abstain from using sexist language and stereotypes when reporting on women's political activities or cases of harassment and violence.
- Provide special educational activities of journalists covering politics or elections to prepare them to report and cover incidents or threats of violence against women politicians.
- Focus media attention on positive stories, not to give outlet to perpetrators of violence who use the media to target politically active women.
- Engage in a continuous media campaign against stereotypes and sexism and violence toward women politicians.

Recommendations to civil society

- Focus the attention on raising awareness of the presence and the impact of the violence against politically active women for the society as a whole.
- Organize multi stakeholder action and continuous campaign activities across the country.
- Organize multi stakeholder educational activities and campaigns to raise the voice against violence in politics, especially toward women.
- Provide targeted aid and support to women victims of political violence.
- Organize public forum discussions in every municipality and regional level for exchange of opinion and experience on how to effectively counter different forms of violence, stereotyping, sexist and inflammatory and hate speech toward women in politics.
- Examine and regularly publish expert work on the themes, types and subtypes of violence against women in politics, and studies of resolution of cases.
- Explore the relationship between cultural stereotypes, mentality and violence toward politically active women.
- Train and work with media on recognizing and reporting violence against women in politics.
- Provide pro bono legal services to women politicians victims of violence or under threat to violence.

- Provide skill sets of activities to enable non political women to take proactive roles in political parties, enhancing political representation in the country.
- Design activities and campaigns to help society stop the tolerance of violence altogether, especially towards women.
- Engage both women and men in various activities and training sessions to get familiar with all the types of politically based violence and come together with proper solutions.
- Organize activities for exchange of experience and know-how from the women politicians from sister parties and EU institutions, organize international debates and forums.

