



Invisible Retreat

**The Impact of Violence Against Women
in Politics on Women's Political Participation
in Serbia**



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Foreword

Although we’re well into the 21st century, women in politics remain unequal to their male counterparts. They face persistent violence and widespread discouragement from political engagement. This is a global issue, and Serbia is no exception. The violence ranges from verbal and digital abuse to sexual and physical assault. Regardless of form, research shows that the systemic failure to address violence against women in politics (VAWP)—through dedicated mechanisms and meaningful sanctions—continues to deter women from pursuing political leadership, or even participating at the most basic level.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) supports equal political participation for marginalised groups, with women at the forefront. This analysis, conducted by the Center for Support of Women (CSW), draws on desk research and focus group interviews with women (formerly) active in politics to uncover the root causes behind low rates of female political participation and leadership.

Key stakeholders, including political institutions, parties, and civil society, must work in concert to establish safe and equitable conditions for women’s political engagement in Serbia. This means strengthening mechanisms to address and penalise VAWP, and responding to reported incidents swiftly and fairly. WFD stands ready to support these efforts to help ensure stronger political representation, institutional inclusion, and leadership opportunities for women in Serbia.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), Serbia

Introduction

In the current social and political context of Serbia, women who are actively engaged in public spaces - whether through institutional politics, civic activism, or informal social action - are increasingly subjected to systematic violence and pressure. Although they operate from different positions and structures, female politicians, activists, and members of grassroots initiatives share a common characteristic: they represent a challenge to patriarchal and exclusionary power structures.

Women’s public engagement is often not viewed solely as a political act but also as a transgression of traditional gender roles. As a result, the violence they experience is not exclusively political; it is deeply gendered, manifesting through sexist attacks, threats, hate speech, humiliation, and various forms of obstruction. Such violence discourages women, excludes them from political and public life, and renders them invisible.

Violence against women in politics takes many forms: from online, verbal, and psychological abuse, to media defamation, public shaming, physical attacks, threats, stalking, and harassment. Common institutional inaction helps sustain this violence, the weakening of protective mechanisms, and the normalisation of misogyny in public and political discourse. Of particular concern is the role of semiotic violence, through which women are symbolically targeted via language, imagery, labelling, and stereotypes.

In the broader societal and political narrative, there is a growing trend of anti-feminist rhetoric and a resurgence of traditional gender norms. This is reflected in the glorification of the “traditional woman” (as a mother and homemaker) while politically active women are portrayed as deviant or “unwomanly”. Such portrayals fuel social pressure and condemnation of their political engagement. Female politicians are rarely assessed solely on their knowledge, ideas, or actions.

Female politicians in Serbia often face deeply entrenched gender roles that assign them to so-called “natural” spheres of activity including family, caregiving, education, and “soft” policy areas. **At the same time, domains of power, decision-making, and security continue to be perceived as the preserve of men.** When women express the ambition to compete on an equal footing, they are often met with ridicule, belittlement, or outright verbal attacks.

Sexist comments about physical appearance, clothing, private life, marital status, and motherhood remain commonplace not only in the media, but also in parliamentary debates, political campaigns, and on social media platforms.

Such narratives do not merely trivialise the role of women in politics but they actively discourage women from entering politics in the first place. Research shows that female politicians and activists are routinely subjected to online abuse, threats, and hate campaigns. Social media is then used as a tool for the organised targeting of women, including hate speech, the publishing of private information (doxing), and sexualised intimidation. This discourse serves a dual function: on the one hand, it intimidates and discourages women from engaging politically; on the other, it creates a climate that justifies the violence they endure.

Certain mechanisms for the protection of women in politics formally exist, but are rarely utilised in practice. **In the absence of systemic responses to violence, women in politics are left with a stark choice: to remain silent and withdraw, or to speak out and risk further attacks.**

In addition to procedural, formal, legislative, and broader societal factors that affect women’s political participation, this research focuses specifically on the experiences of violence encountered by female politicians and activists, and the impact that such violence has on their continued engagement, or withdrawal, from public life.

By analysing the experiences of politically active women and those engaged in public life, this research highlights the patterns, mechanisms, and consequences of such violence, as well as the strategies of resistance, solidarity, and survival that women develop within Serbia’s increasingly restricted democratic space.

1. Women in public spaces – the social and political context

Women’s participation in political institutions in Serbia has increased notably over the past decade, primarily due to legislative changes and the introduction of gender quotas. Historically, from the 1980s to the present, women’s representation has varied significantly depending on the prevailing political and social context, as well as the country’s political system itself. The 1980s were marked by relatively high levels of women’s representation – surpassing, at times, the participation of women in the parliaments of the European Union (EU) member states. A sharp decline followed in the 1990s, while the first decade of the 2000s saw a renewed upward trend.

During the 1990s, the share of women in political life plummeted to 8.4%. This period has been described as an era of “masculinized democracy” characterized by patriarchal power structures and pronounced traditionalism in which women were largely absent from the public and political sphere. Women’s position was further undermined by the impact of war, economic crisis, rising unemployment, widespread poverty, and violence. It was also observed that women candidates were often placed in electoral districts where their parties believed they had little chance of success or were positioned at the bottom of party lists. This trend of underrepresentation continued throughout the 1990s.

Civil society organisations and the women’s movement also played an important role in increasing the political participation of women. These actors worked to introduce the first mechanisms for gender equality and anti-discrimination policies in Serbia. Gender quotas on candidate lists were introduced for the first time in the 2002 [Law on Local Elections](#). With amendments to the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly, a **Committee on Gender Equality was established in 2003 as a permanent working body of the Assembly**. Several key institutional bodies such as the Ombudsman, Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Directorate for Gender Equality, and various provincial bodies were also introduced in the early 2000s.

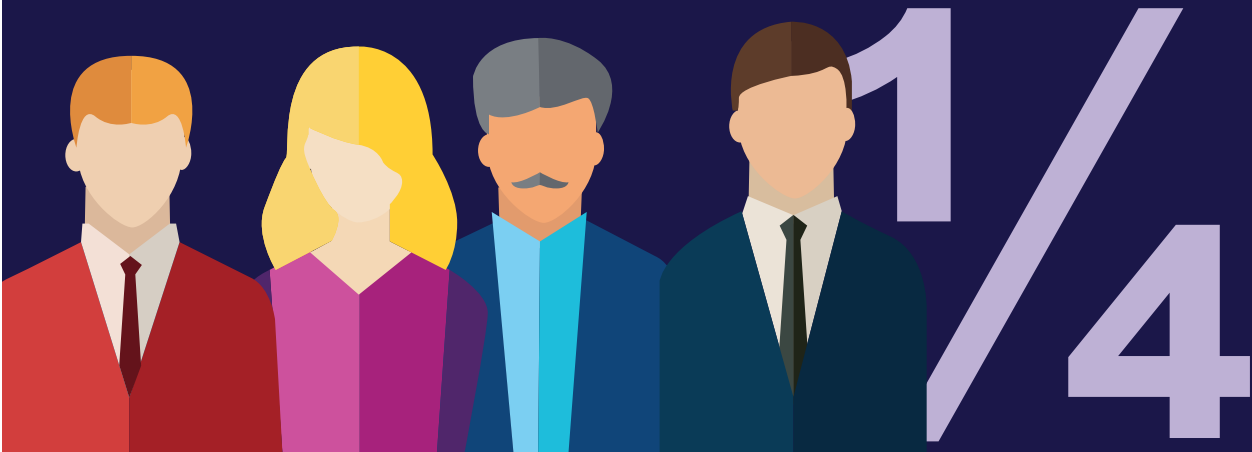
During the second decade of the 2000s, an amendment to the [Law on the Election of Members of Parliament was adopted](#), prescribing that every third position on a candidate list must be reserved for the less-represented gender. The next important step was taken between 2019 and 2021, when women’s representation in the parliament rose steadily due to the introduction of a [new amendment](#). **From then on, it is mandated that 40% of candidates on party lists must be women or more precisely - the “less represented gender”.**



Turning to the experiences and testimonies of female politicians, we must acknowledge the indicators that women MPs and local councillors face belittlement, discredit, denial of access to resources, and other challenges. **This happens as early as in the campaign stage and especially during the formation of candidate lists.** Some of the women who participated in this research stated that, although they hold high-ranking or leadership positions within their parties, struggle to gain public visibility or media attention. Furthermore, in the 2022 parliamentary elections, of the 12 electoral lists that won seats, only 3 – one quarter of all lists – had women as lead candidates.

The political parties themselves¹ are among the key factors shaping women’s political participation. The importance of gender sensitivity in procedures, internal rules, and the distribution of power within political institutions must also be considered, as this directly affects the level of activity, involvement, and participation of women officeholders in decision-making processes. **Women often testify that, although they formally hold decision-making positions within their parties, decisions are made outside the formal party procedures and bodies, which are then used merely to legitimise decisions already taken.**

In the 2022 parliamentary elections, only one quarter of electoral lists were led by women. This outcome illustrates the persistent gap between women’s formal positions within parties and their limited influence over actual decision-making processes.



Quotas have indeed led to an increase in the number of female MPs, but they are not a guarantee that women’s interests will be better represented². Likewise, mere presence in the political sphere does not mean that this space is safe for women.

Women take their first steps into politics most often through activist engagement in Serbia. They are among the most prominent actors, particularly within the anti-war movement. Women are also present within broader social movements, including environmental campaigns. In some of these movements, the need arose to establish women’s groups or networks. These models would later be introduced into party structures in Serbia. **However, women’s groups or Women Forums are often insufficiently integrated into party activities and programmes, functioning instead according to the principles of women’s sections.**

¹ Internal structures, decision-making mechanisms, distribution of resources, and the gender sensitivity of their programmes of political parties in Serbia.

² Unequal pay, limited access to leadership positions, difficulties balancing professional and private life, stereotypes tied to gender roles, unpaid domestic work and caregiving responsibilities for children and the elderly, gender-based violence, and domestic and intimate-partner violence all represent social factors that influence women’s opportunities for political engagement.

2. Legal framework

2.1. International instruments

The following documents outline the global legal standards that Serbia aligns with, which recognize violence against women in public spaces as a human rights violation. These instruments guide the national laws and institutional responses, ensuring safe, equal participation for women in public life.

CEDAW – General Recommendation No. 35 (2017): The document recognizes violence in public/political life as gender-based violence. It covers physical, psychological, economic, sexual and online violence. Furthermore, it obligates states to ensure safe, non-discriminatory participation of women.

OSCE/ODIHR Guidelines on Violence Against Women in Politics (2019): Defines political violence as gender-based and targeted at women. It includes physical, sexual, economic, and online dimensions, and aims to prevent the discouragement, exclusion, or silencing of women in politics.

Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe): Serbia ratified the document in 2013. The convention defines violence against women as a human rights violation and is applied to all public spheres to include also online violence. It establishes a requirement for measures to combat digital abuse and misogynistic content.

GDPR & Serbian Law on Personal Data Protection (2008): Aligns Serbian law with EU standards and is meant for the protection against unauthorized use of personal data. It also offers legal resources through the Commissioner for Information and Data Protection.

2.2. Domestic legislation

Constitution of the Republic of Serbia: Prohibits discrimination, including based on sex (article 21), Protects physical and psychological integrity (article 23), Affirms gender equality in work and public life (article 60). However, it does not explicitly address political violence against women.

Criminal Code: Criminalizes threats (article 138), Covers stalking, including online (article 138a), Addresses doxxing and data misuse (article 146), Prevents obstruction of political activity (article 147), Covers abuse linked to public functions (article 170). However, political violence is not systematically distinguished or addressed.

Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination: Prohibits discrimination based on sex and political beliefs. However, gender-based violence is not explicitly defined.

Law on Gender Equality (2021): Defines gender-based violence. Obligated authorities to ensure equal participation. Prohibits discrimination in media and online platforms. Provides a basis for addressing tech-facilitated violence.

Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence (2016): Enables rapid institutional response to threats and can be interpreted to apply to political contexts and online harassment.

Law on Electronic Media (2023): Prohibits content inciting discrimination or violence based on gender, political affiliation, etc.

Law on Public Information and Media (2023): Allows courts to ban media content that incited direct violence.

Parliamentary Protection Mechanisms: The Code of Conduct for MPs prohibits hate speech, stereotypes and degrading language. The Ethics Committee is meant to oversee enforcement of the Code of Conduct.

Key gaps identified:

- **No explicit recognition of political violence against women**
- **Lack of specialized protection mechanisms**
- **Absence of systematic data collection and analysis**
- **Violence remains largely unpunished, especially online.**

**No recognition.
No protection.
Violence remains.**

The absence of recognition and protection continues to sustain the persistence of violence.



3. Forms of violence against women in public spaces

Violence against women in public spaces is an intertwining of physical, psychological, and semiotic violence, which does not occur in isolation but rather as part of a broader strategy aimed at intimidating women in public spaces and deterring them from participation in public and political life.

3.1. Semiotic violence

Semiotic violence is a sophisticated form of social control that does not use direct force but rather meanings and symbols to keep women in politics on the margins or to undermine their credibility. Recognising and deconstructing this type of violence is crucial to understanding the broader context of gender inequality and the mechanisms of political exclusion in contemporary Serbia.

Female politicians are most often framed by the media through headlines that highlight their clothing, emotional reactions, or marital status, while their political positions are simultaneously marginalised or trivialised. Additionally, gendered language is used as a weapon in political confrontation, as well as visual stigmatization, labelling and gender stereotypes.

Semiotic violence leaves no physical trace, but its consequences are profound: it creates an environment in which women are discouraged from political engagement and society is conditioned to view their presence as an exception, a deviation, or even a threat.

Semiotic violence lays the groundwork for physical and psychological violence to become socially acceptable, and even desirable. Recognising and deconstructing this form of violence is key to understanding the wider context of gender inequality and the mechanisms of political exclusion of women in contemporary Serbia.

3.2. Physical violence against women in public spaces

Physical violence is the most direct and visible form of violence, involving the use of bodily force with the aim of causing injury, exerting control, intimidating, or preventing a person's movement or activity. When directed against women who are politically engaged or participating in civic protests, physical violence acquires an additional political and gender dimension, as its purpose is to discourage, silence, and exclude them from public space. Physical and psychological violence thus become responses to political disobedience.

A common intimidatory approach is physical violence against women at protests. It not only affects the direct victim, but also other women who might consider becoming politically engaged. It functions as a mechanism of power and control, restricting freedom of speech and assembly.

Despite occurring in public, physical violence against women often goes unpunished. Women who report violence frequently encounter a dismissive or indifferent response from the police and prosecution services, particularly when the attacks are linked to political events.

It is important to note that physical violence rarely occurs in isolation – it is often accompanied by verbal abuse, sexist remarks, and psychological pressure.

3.3. Psychological violence against women in public spaces

Psychological violence (also referred to as emotional or mental violence) involves the deliberate infliction of emotional suffering, fear, feelings of powerlessness, or insecurity through verbal attacks, threats, intimidation, belittlement, and systematic humiliation. In the context of women’s political and civic engagement, psychological violence is often the most prevalent — yet also the most difficult to prove — form of violence, as it occurs without physical contact but leaves deep and lasting consequences. A common example is the use of gendered stigmatization with the aim of undermining political legitimacy of women in politics.

The primary aim of psychological violence is not debate or political confrontation, but rather systematic intimidation, discouragement, and ultimately the exclusion of women from participation in public life. It sends a clear message that their presence is unwelcome and will result in personal attacks.

A key characteristic of psychological violence is its persistence and repetition.

Although it leaves no physical trace, its effects are profound and long-lasting, leading to the demotivation, marginalisation, and exclusion of women from public and political life. In the Serbian context, where institutions can be ineffective or complicit in the normalisation of misogyny, psychological violence becomes part of a systemic barrier to women’s equal participation in political life.

3.4. Misogyny as the basis and driver of violence against women in public spaces

Misogyny serves as the ideological foundation, semiotic violence functions as the cultural apparatus of normalization, and physical and psychological violence act as the operative mechanisms of control. Together, they form a matrix of intimidation aimed at silencing women, deterring them, and excluding them from processes of public and political transformation.

In this context, misogyny does not merely function as prejudice, but as an ideological foundation that legitimizes violence against women who have “stepped out of their assigned role”.

In Serbia, misogyny is not an isolated phenomenon but a persistent feature of public and political discourse. Even institutions formally tasked with safeguarding equality often uncritically reproduce such language. There have been several instances during parliamentary proceedings where use of misogynistic language went unaddressed, without any provided protection for women MPs. Recognizing and documenting these statements is crucial to understanding gender-based violence against politically active women, as they reveal how symbols of degradation shape the real status and operating space of female politicians and activists.



3.5. Sexual harassment of women in public spaces

Sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence manifested through unwanted sexual remarks, gestures, touching, or behaviour that aims to or results in humiliating, intimidating, degrading, or creating a hostile environment for a woman. In the political context, sexual harassment is used as a tool for excluding women from public space, combining elements of power, control, and misogyny.

Sexual harassment of women in politics and during civic protests is a form of misogynistic political violence that combines physical and psychological domination, sexualisation of the female political body, and public disqualification of a woman's authority. It is a mechanism of control and exclusion that further narrows the space for women's engagement and sends a strong message that political power in Serbia still operates according to patriarchal rules rather than equality.

Sexual harassment of women in politics and at protests most often comes from positions of power: from colleagues, party leaders, officeholders, but also from police officers, media commentators, and individuals within the crowd.

Although visible, this form of violence frequently goes unpunished. **Even when it occurs in public spaces, such as parliaments, protests, the media, or social networks, sexual harassment is rarely sanctioned, as Serbian institutions do not recognize harassment in the political context as a distinct form of violence.**

In Serbia, sexual harassment of female politicians and activists is not systematically recorded, studied, or prosecuted. Numerous women have spoken publicly about harassment by party colleagues, officeholders, media commentators, or citizens, yet institutional responses are often absent.

3.6. Technology-facilitated violence against women online

Technology-facilitated violence against women encompasses all forms of violence that are perpetrated against, amplified, or enabled against women using digital technologies. In the context of women in politics and civic activism in Serbia, this form of violence is becoming increasingly widespread and severe, particularly during periods of heightened social tensions and political protests.

Technology-facilitated violence is a new but highly dangerous form of gender-based violence in Serbia's political context. Recognising, documenting, and sanctioning these forms of violence is crucial to building a safer, more democratic, and gender-equal society.

4. Experiences of female politicians and activists – findings from research on the impact of violence against women in public spaces in Serbia

Women’s political participation in Serbia has recorded progress in terms of formal representation over recent decades, yet their experiences remain marked by discrimination, violence, and numerous structural barriers. The aim of this research was to provide insight into the personal narratives of female politicians and activists regarding their participation in political life, the challenges they face, and the strategies they use to resist pressure and gender violence.

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 30 interviewees from diverse political and social contexts, enabling a deep understanding of both individual experiences and the broader social framework within which women engage in politics.

4.1. Entering politics and motivation

For most interviewees, entry into politics was driven by ideals and a personal sense of responsibility toward society, rather than a desire for personal affirmation (*“change cannot come only through projects, but through politics”*). Political engagement most often began through student and civic protests, activism in local associations, or participation in youth forums of political parties. For some women, entering politics was a natural continuation of their civic and professional engagement. For some interviewees, sports, education, or professional experience provided an important springboard.

Many interviewees emphasised that their motivation for entering politics was linked to resisting authoritarian structures and contributing to democratisation (*“I wanted to show that politics does not have to be a space of corruption and conflict, but also a space for change and improving the community”*).

In Serbia, politics are most often viewed through a predominantly male perspective as an “arena” in which the opponent must be defeated, rather than as a space for cooperation or joint problem-solving. In contrast, the interviewees in this research testified that their entry into politics was almost always motivated by social values and solidarity; by the fight against injustice; by a desire to improve the position of women and the community. Rather than viewing politics as a “career ladder” or a space for personal dominance, they perceive it as a platform for change and the common good. Their narratives emphasise empathy, community, and networks of support.

The difference can also be observed in the ways women deal with challenges, creating mechanisms of resilience, solidarity, and creative resistance³. While the “male approach” sees politics as a field of conquest, the “female approach” is closer to a field of care and transformation. For this reason, women involved in this research reported that they often enter politics through alternative pathways such as the civil sector, student and civic initiatives, since formal party structures are shaped by masculine patterns of power and self-affirmation.

The women interviewed held a variety of positions: from local councillors and committee chairs to Members of Parliament and party vice-presidents. Their political rise was rarely linear - many were recognized through activism in their local community before given an institutional position. **However, political visibility was often accompanied by resistance and belittlement from colleagues as well as the media, which limited room for action.**

Some interviewees temporarily left politics or significantly reduced their engagement, citing exhaustion, while others adopted strategies of “periodic withdrawal” to preserve their personal capacities.

³ For example, connecting with the civil sector, relying on mutual support, and drawing on personal capacities.

In addition to formal political participation, it is important to highlight the experiences of women activists. They testified that it was precisely through protests, campaigns, and civil society work that they developed skills in leadership, public speaking, and community mobilisation. **For many, activism provided a freer space to express themselves and shape their political views — but also the arena in which they first encountered pressure and forms of violence.**

4.2. Experiences of violence and harassment

The interviewees described a wide spectrum of violence they had experienced ranging from institutional and media smear campaigns, online death threats and insults, and public humiliation, to physical assaults, property destruction, and intimidation of family members.

Specific cases of violence

Physical and direct violence

Interviewees described physical violence and pressure, including intimidation and direct assault (*“One man spat on me in the street...”*). These incidents point to a clear connection between political engagement and physical repression, where property damage and physical attacks carry an explicit message of deterrence and intimidation. Interviewees noted that such incidents often occurred after they had publicly expressed particular views or after media programmes in which they had been portrayed in a derogatory manner.

Online violence and defamation campaigns

Several women spoke about sustained online attacks — misogynistic and sexist comments, death threats, and the publication of private data. One interviewee reported receiving threats on social media such as *“you should be slaughtered”*, while others described how their children were targeted in online attacks. The interviewees identified online violence as particularly harmful because it is public, remains accessible for long periods of time, it is difficult to remove, and leaves a profound psychological impact.

Institutional pressure and media smear campaigns

Several women reported being targeted by orchestrated media campaigns in which they were portrayed as “traitors” and “foreign mercenaries”. Such campaigns included multi-hour television programmes and tabloid articles aimed at publicly humiliating and discrediting them. At the same time, they faced misdemeanour proceedings for participating in protests, while their reports of violence were often dismissed on the grounds of “insufficient evidence.” These situations illustrate a form of double victimisation. Women suffer violence, and then secondary victimisation through the actions of institutions and the media.

Psychological violence and pressure in the private and professional spheres

Several interviewees described being subjected to insults, humiliation, and isolation within political parties or the institutions where they work. In some cases, they were victims of workplace mobbing, including attempts to remove them from their positions, public shaming, or being denied opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. A particularly severe form of violence involved the targeting of their families. Some interviewees emphasised that their fear was greater for the safety of their children and loved ones than for their own personal security.

The violence, which clearly had a gendered dimension, was often linked to periods of heightened public visibility, occurring when interviewees spoke in the public space. This fear, both for themselves and for their families, intensified the pressure on women to withdraw from public life or resort to self-censorship (*“Our address was posted on Instagram...”*).

Testimonies from women engaged in public and political life reveal a recurring pattern: the tendency to downplay the significance of the violence they experience.

It is observed that such incidents frequently go unaddressed. A lack of time, energy, or access to support mechanisms often leaves them without viable options. **As a result, violence remains largely unreported and perpetrators unpunished.** Instead of being adequately recognised, addressed, and prosecuted, violence becomes normalized in public and political spaces (*“Violence on the internet and social media is constant... but for me, it’s a sign that I’m doing something important and that activism makes sense”*). Several women explicitly noted that violence is becoming “normalized.” Their experiences with reporting to the Cybercrime Unit have been overwhelmingly negative. Interviewees noted that such acts are rarely prosecuted, perpetrators are not identified, and no legal consequences follow.

In addition to verbal violence, women politicians and activists often experience surveillance and stalking, sometimes even to their official offices, and not infrequently encounter physical violence in the context of political activism - some within legislative bodies (in parliamentary chambers or directly in front of institutions). This violence comes from security personnel, formal or informal, and sometimes from members of other political parties. The frequency of violence increases proportionally with their visibility. **It is important to note that women do not want to show that the violence has affected them to the extent that it would make them retreat.** On the contrary, these experiences often motivate them to continue, giving them a renewed sense of strength and confirmation that their engagement is being noticed or making an impact.

4.3. Reactions of institutions and the public: The importance of support

The experiences of all interviewees show that reaching out to institutions often ended without a response or was discouraging. The accounts indicated that institutions generally fail to respond adequately to reports of violence. Competent authorities would mostly adopt the stance that there was “insufficient evidence”, making it clear to women that institutional protection was not guaranteed. Despite this, women still choose to contact institutions, most often driven by a sense of responsibility to document the incident and to demonstrate that violence is unacceptable (*“The message is that nothing will happen without us, but we must not give up on institutions; we must return to a system where institutions function”*).

In many cases, reliance on institutions is replaced by informal mechanisms such as support from family, friends, party colleagues, and civil society organisations. Interviewees emphasise that informal solidarity circles provide both emotional and logistical support, often more effectively than institutional mechanisms. **However, cross-party solidarity among women is rare and sporadic: political divisions and party discipline limit the creation of lasting support networks.** Interviewees recognise that a certain degree of solidarity exists, but not general or structured solidarity through a support network or body — rather, it is individual, coming from fellow party members, some civil society organisations, or journalists.

This support had multiple dimensions – emotional (encouragement, presence), practical (legal assistance, sharing information, organizing public appearances), and symbolic (public solidarity and condemnation of violence). Support within parties exists in the form of legal, emotional, and logistical help, although it is often informal. Interviewees point out that cooperation with civil society organisations is significant, as these often provide legal aid, psychosocial support, and visibility to cases of violence that institutions ignore. In some cases, the support of female colleagues from the party or activist groups was crucial for women to continue their engagement despite the violence. However, it is mentioned that solidarity between women politicians is weak – or, on the contrary, that there is a high degree of tension in inter-party relations between them (*“I would like to see a women’s support network that is not tied to political parties”*).

Support is generally fragmented, but the interviewees recognise both the potential and the need for broader support networks. Networks of solidarity, whether formal or informal, have often given women the sense that they are not alone and that their experiences resonate more broadly in society (*“Women in politics need to build networks – it’s incredibly important – and they need to speak openly about what they go through and how they feel”*).

4.4. Impact of violence on work and private life

The violence women experienced has deep consequences, both professionally and personally. On a professional level, it led to self-censorship, reduced public appearances, or avoidance of certain topics in order to minimize exposure to attack. On a personal level, violence created a constant sense of insecurity, fear for their children and families, and psychological pressure that results in anxiety and, at times, temporary withdrawal from public life.

At the same time, women developed their own protection mechanisms ranging from personal strategies (avoiding social media, carrying pepper spray) to collective ones (self-help groups, peer-to-peer support). These mechanisms helped them regain a sense of control and rebuild the capacity to continue their work, although they were often not enough to compensate for the lack of institutional protection in the long term. **Violence most often results in withdrawal, reduced activity, and a sense of insecurity, but also in increased resilience.**

Among the mechanisms identified as helpful for women in politics and activism to restore their personal capacity are conversations with party colleagues, other women, and activists from women's organizations; engaging in hobbies; spending time with family; recreation; or sports. In general, most of the interviews recognise the need for psychological support.

4.5. Reasons for women's withdrawal from politics and public engagement

Although most interviewees emphasise that violence and pressure do not immediately lead to their withdrawal from politics or activism, and often trigger defiance and a desire to prove themselves (*"When they publicly insult me, I feel defiance – I won't let them win. That's what pushes me forward."*), experiences show that this resistance has its limits. However, although such resistance reactions often occur immediately after experiences of violence, long-term exposure to violence and the absence of adequate institutional protection leave serious consequences. The interviewees say that after years of insults, threats and belittling, burnout, self-cens and withdrawal occur.

Fear for the safety of their family and children contributes to the decision to withdraw or reduce public visibility (*"... maybe it's not worth exposing myself if my children are going to suffer."*).

In addition to violence, women cite other factors that drain them: the lack of support within political parties, limited access to resources and media visibility, as well as the constant need to balance public engagement with private responsibilities. The combination of these factors creates an atmosphere in which many women politicians and activists choose "strategies of temporary withdrawal" to preserve their personal capacities, while some decide to permanently withdraw from public life.

4.6. Views and recommendations

An important conclusion was the necessity for further strengthening of legal and institutional protection mechanisms, as well as the need for creating a space for cross-party solidarity and a collective response by women to violence.

For women who experience violence in political or public life, the options available include reporting to the police, going through court proceedings, or activating institutional protection mechanisms if they are councillors and the violence occurred within those institutions. They may also seek protection through public exposure by addressing the media, rely on the resources of their political party for legal assistance, or turn to civil society organisations.

It would be of great importance for women in the public and political sphere to have a support mechanism that would be automatically activated whenever a form of violence is recognised or when women report it themselves. (*"... instead of woman turning to the legal team when needed, that there is a mechanism that initiates this."*).

Ideally, it should be placed within an institution, such as the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, in the form of an office staffed with experts in legal support and protection, as well as in psychological support.

This office could operate as part of the professional service of the National Assembly, equally accessible to all female politicians, i.e. MPs. The responsibilities of the support office for women politicians experiencing violence within the legislative institution could include monitoring activities within the Assembly, reporting cases to the Ethics Committee (established under the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament), and providing legal and advisory support for further reporting and prosecution before the competent institutions, including assisting MPs directly with filling complaints (*“The message for other women is to be wiser, to seek help... We must take matters into our own hands. Citizens must take care, and when women take something into their hands, they will see it through”*).

Special emphasis was placed on the importance of education and working with young people to dismantle deeply rooted stereotypes and misogyny. Recommendations also include the need for a continuous media campaign highlighting the unacceptability of violence against politically engaged women, as well as the development of specialised mechanisms for reporting and prosecuting violence occurring in the political context.

Recommendations:

For institutions:

- **Legal Reform:** Recognise political violence against women as a distinct category to enable consistent prosecution and monitoring.
- **Mandatory Response:** Ensure timely police and prosecution action to prevent impunity.
- **Support Services:** Establish accessible psychological and legal support, ideally through a dedicated office within the National Assembly.
- **Data Transparency:** Systematically collect and publish data on violence against politically active women.

For political parties:

- **Internal Protection Mechanisms:** Create safe reporting channels and ombudsman roles.
- **Legal Support:** Strengthen party legal teams to assist female members.
- **Zero-tolerance Policies:** Enforce protocols against sexist and misogynistic speech.
- **Solidarity Networks:** Promote intra- and inter-party solidarity to publicly counter violence.

For media:

- **Ethical Reporting:** Avoid sexist portrayals and adopt standards for respectful coverage.
- **Promote Dialogue:** Encourage balanced, non-polarizing discourse to reduce hostility.

For civil society:

- **Monitoring and Advocacy:** Continue documenting cases and pressuring institutions.
- **Direct Support:** Provide legal and psychological aid through flexible, trusted channels.
- **Solidarity Campaigns:** Strengthen peer networks and collective responses.

For women politicians and activists:

- **Networking and Mentorship:** Share experiences to build resilience and effective responses.
- **Mental Health Care:** Normalize seeking psychological support as part of self-care.
- **Documentation and Legal Action:** Keep records to support prosecution and institutional change.

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