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BREAKING THE SILENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS



The report on Violence Against Women in Politics during the Lebanese parliamentary elections 2022.

This report is produced jointly by **Madanyat** and **Maharat Foundation**.

Author:

Abir CHEBARO, Gender Expert

Contributors:

Madanyat: Nada ANID, Founder. Executive Director
Cyril BADAoui, Project Coordinator, Legal Advisor

Maharat: Roula MIKHAEI, Executive Director
Layal BAHNAM, Program Manager
Mia CROCHOT, Program Research Assistant
Vanessa ROUKOZ, Social Media Manager
Hussein AL SHARIF, Research and Project Coordinator

Report Design: Habib AKIKI, Media Officer



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Executive Summary

VAWP is widely acknowledged as a violation of women's political rights and a significant obstacle to their representation in politics. VAWP is defined as any act, or threat, of physical, sexual or psychological violence that hinders women from exercising and realizing their political rights as well as a wide array of human rights. It can manifest itself in different ways including, but not limited to physical abuse, hate speech, kidnapping, threats, intimidation, sexual harassment, online abuse and economic violence. In order to remedy the lack of available data on VAWP in Lebanon, the #MeTooPolitics project documented women's experiences in politics through 4 focus groups based on a questionnaire conducted in Beirut, Mount Lebanon and South governorates, aiming to provide quantitative and qualitative data on VAWP.

A sample consisting of 15 young female activists and politically engaged women from both established and emerging political groups, 22 female journalists, and 18 female candidates for the parliamentary elections of 2022 participated in these focus groups to share their personal experiences and testimonies on the prevalence of VAWP. In addition, meetings were organized with 8 parliamentarians and 1 member from the Supervisory Commission for Elections.

The findings of the quantitative study revealed that 80% of respondents acknowledged having experienced VAWP, demonstrating that it is a widespread phenomenon in Lebanon. However, according to those findings, only 39% of cases of VAWP experienced by participants or one of their colleagues have been reported. This could be linked to the absence of a complaint mechanism as 60% of participants estimated that no means or methods were available to report the complaint. Furthermore, findings showed the prevalence of online violence against women in politics on social media.



The qualitative findings demonstrated that different forms of violence are experienced by female activists and women in politics. The severity and consequences of gender-based violence in politics are impacted by a number of interrelated factors, including sex, age, class, political allegiance, and religion. Those findings also emphasized the fact that the patriarchal system brutally responds to any change that emancipated women might bring about, especially at the political level, traditionally assigned, and dominated by men.

Stories shared by female participants during focus groups showed a pattern of similarities of violence between women and gender non-conforming groups in addition to the persistence of the perception of gender identity as an incentive of violence. Women's experiences also highlighted religious authorities' resistance to any change that may empower women as well as the existence of violence emanating from within the family against women opposed to its political line. The increasing psychological and physical violence against women in politics and their assignment to social duties instead of political strategic roles were additionally emphasized by participants.

Maharat and Madanyat call on policy-makers to create a legislative framework that would prevent VAWP, protect women from all forms of violence and end the impunity of perpetrators. Maharat and Madanyat also call on civil society to encourage more female victims to break the silence on their own experience of violence and report cases of VAWP. Media should also adopt gender-sensitive reporting when covering cases of VAWP. Finally, social media platforms should moderate content related to VAWP to prevent gendered disinformation, hate speech, online harassment, cyberstalking, blackmail, and cyberbullying.



Introduction

Gender equality requires women's equal participation and access to positions of political leadership and decision-making at all levels, as stated in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (art. 3)¹ and reaffirmed in Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.²

Despite the right to vote granted to women in Lebanon in 1952³ and the existence of a vigorous feminist movement, Lebanese women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in public and political life at all levels of political decision-making.

Only 9 out of the 77 Lebanese government cabinets since 1943 have included women. Women are underrepresented in the government with only 1 woman minister out of 24 ministers, this makes about 4.17 percent of the actual government. Lebanon is ranked 112th out of 156 countries in the 2021 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index for female political representation.⁴



1-OHCHR. (1979, December 18). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

2-Goal 5 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (). United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

3-Parliament of Lebanon. (1952). Legislative decree number 6: Amendment of the law on the election of members of parliament issued on 10-8-1950. *Official Gazette*, 46, 927-934.

<http://www.legjiliban.ul.edu.lb/LawArticles.aspx?LawTreeSectionID=197058&LawID=194819&language=ar>

4-Gender Gap Report 2021. (2021). World Economic Forum. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf



Lebanon ranked 179th out of 186 countries for the month of April 2022 by the IPU Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments.⁵ Despite a record number of 157 female candidates (15% of all candidates) running for parliament ahead to the 2022 legislative elections,⁶ 37% of electoral lists did not include any woman candidate.⁷ Just 8 women were elected out of the 118 women candidates who joined lists.⁸

This means a mere 6.25% of the 128 elected Members of Parliament, 93.75% of which are men.

When it comes to exercising their political rights, women confront several obstacles, the most concerning of which is violence against women in politics (VAWP).



In 2013, the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict, and post-conflict situations stated that meaningful progress toward equal participation of women is impossible without appropriate measures, such as ensuring that female political candidates and voters are not the targets of violence by either State or private actors (para 72).

Prior to the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in 2018, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women delivered a theme report which emphasizes the significance of designing, enacting, and enforcing laws and policies on gender equality and the prevention of VAW that complies with international human rights legislation.

5- Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2022, June). IPU comparative data on structure of parliament [Dataset]. <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=6&year=2022>

6- Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities. (2022, April). Elections Website List of all candidates running for parliamentary elections 2022. <https://bit.ly/3vVASRI>

7- Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.(2022, March 16). Elections Website Final list of candidates running for parliamentary elections 2022 <https://bit.ly/3Fs2JeR>

8- Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.(2022, May 17) Elections Website Final lists of winner candidates for parliamentary elections 2022 <http://www.interior.gov.lb/AdsDetails.aspx?ida=5438>



VAWP is now on the rise, and it manifests itself in a variety of ways, including increased harassment, intimidation, sexual and physical assault against women in public life, and gender-biased public and media discrimination, to name a few.

The Internet has given women new avenues to express themselves and participate politically, but it has also given offenders new tools to attack women. While VAWP emerges in a variety of ways, its goal and consequences are universal. VAWP impedes women's political participation and is a threat to the democracy.⁹

To fulfill its mission, UNDP LEAP supported the teaming of Madanyat and Maharat Foundation under #MeTooPolitics project to strengthen women's political participation and representation in the 2022 parliamentary elections, particularly highlighting and increasing awareness of VAWP concerns, and creating an advocacy partnership committing to change the status quo.

There is relatively minimal data on VAWP in all its manifestations in Lebanon. Because of the culture of silence, shame, and impunity associated with gender-based violence (GBV)¹⁰ VAWP, a type of GBV, is frequently under-reported to official institutions.

9-Di Meco, L., Brechenmacher, S. (Nov 30, 2020). Tackling Online Abuse and Disinformation Targeting Women in Politics. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics-pub-83331>

10- International Commission of Jurists. (July 2019). Gender-based violence in Lebanon: Inadequate framework, ineffective remedies. <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Lebanon-Gender-Violence-Publications.pdf>



The #MeTooPolitics project documented and quantified women's experiences in politics with a particular focus on assessing the barriers to political participation, such as harmful norms, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, violent experiences, types of violence, risk and protective factors, help-seeking behaviors, and the effects on women's well-being, and political participation and leadership.

During the project, focus group discussions were organized, facilitated, and conducted in Beirut, Mount Lebanon and South governorates with journalists, women candidates, senior and junior political activists who were all invited to share their personal experiences and testimonies on the prevalence of VAWP.

Participants were from both sexes and different age groups (+21 years old), who are eligible by law to vote.

The focus group discussions were held between mid-March and end of April 2022 according to the following methodology.



Research Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, the following tasks were undertaken:

1. For this project, the following definition of VAWP was used during our discussion:

“Violence Against Women in Politics is any act or practice that is committed to deprive or hinder women from engaging in any political, partisan, or social activity or any fundamental right and freedoms simply because they are women. It is based on gender discrimination, including psychological, sexual, and physical abuse and abuse through constant harassment and personal discrimination.”¹¹

2. A social media announcement for the recruitment of participants was posted and boosted from March 9 to March 21 (inclusive) on the social media platforms of Madanyat and Maharat attracting a total of 100 respondents.

3. Prepare customized questionnaire for each focus group discussion.

4. Prepare and administer a pre-session questionnaire to collect quantitative data. Upon physical registration, participants were asked to fill up an e- survey to identify demographic information and assess their pre-session awareness of the VAWP problem. The results were used as a basis to orient the discussion further in the qualitative part.

11- Expert Group Meeting Report & Recommendations 8-9 March 2018. UN Women: New York, NY. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/ViolenceAgainstWomeninPoliticsReport.pdf>



5. Organize, facilitate, and moderate 4 focus group discussions with a sample of politically active women and young activists from traditional and emerging political groups, journalists, and candidates in 3 governorates in Lebanon.

Women journalists, especially those in political journalism, were selected to participate in the study, because they are perceived as political practitioners. When women claim their proper position in the public realm, their presence and validity are frequently questioned in dangerous and unsettling ways as they are viewed as a threat to patriarchy and authoritarianism and face VAWP.

6. Gather and consolidate all comments, testimonies, and inputs issued by participants on (i) the focus groups on the VAWP at a local level and (ii) their personal experiences and illustrations on the prevalence of the phenomenon, (iii) their recommendations to mitigate and stand against VAWP.

7. Meet with members of the Supervisory Commission for Elections (SCE).

8. Meet with newly elected parliamentarians on a one-to-one basis.

9. The total of people who were involved in the discussion is 64: 22 Journalists, 18 candidates and 15 activists. We have met with only one member of SCE and with 8 parliamentarians



Findings:

Quantitative Data

Highlights of the quantitative data

Q3- Is it true that the higher the proportion of women in politics/public affairs, the higher the rate of violence against them?

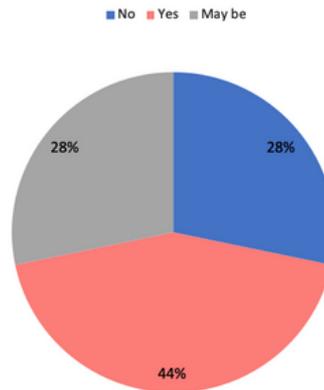


Fig 1: Correlation between the proportion of women in politics and the rate of violence

When asked about the correlation between the rate of violence against women and their proportion in politics, 44% of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants agreed that the higher the number of women in politics, the greater will be the rate of violence against them, while 28% disagreed or partially agreed with the following statement (Fig 1 , Q3).

Q4: Have you or a female colleague been subjected to VAWP?

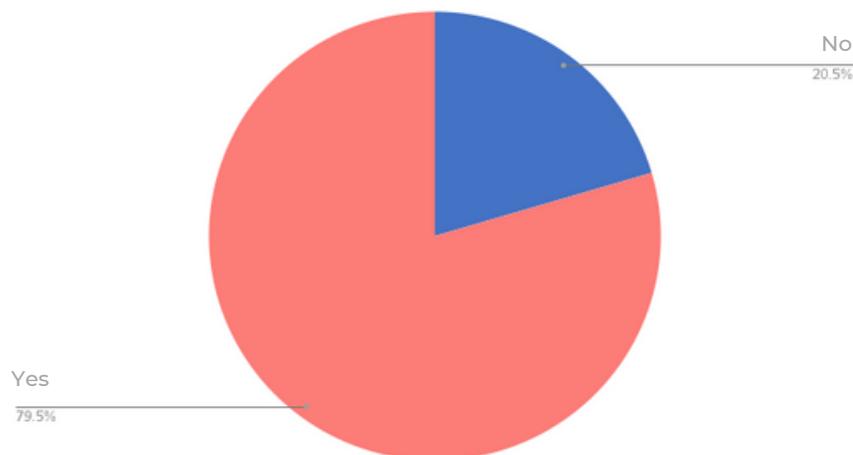


Fig 2: Percentage of women who declared being subject to VAWP

As per the participants, 79.5% declared that they have been subject to VAWP (Fig 2 , Q4).



Q5: Has the case been reported?

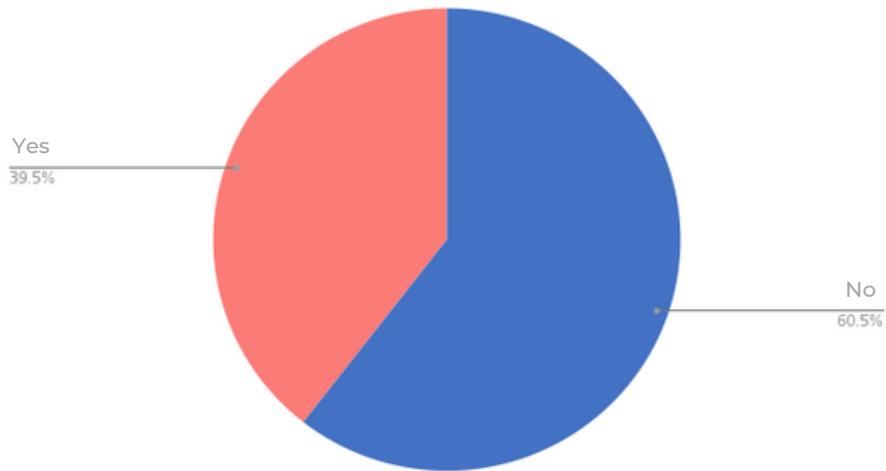
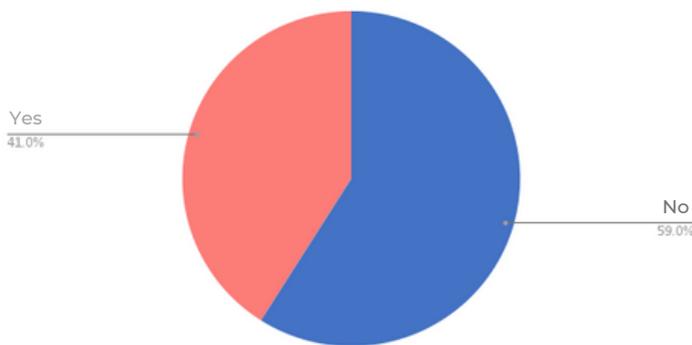


Fig 3: Percentage of VAWP cases reported

Despite the fact that 80% of the surveyed participants claimed to have personally experienced VAWP or to know a woman who had, only 39.5% of those cases have been reported. (Fig 3, Q5)

Q6: Are there any means and methods to officially report the complaint?



Q7: Have measures been taken?

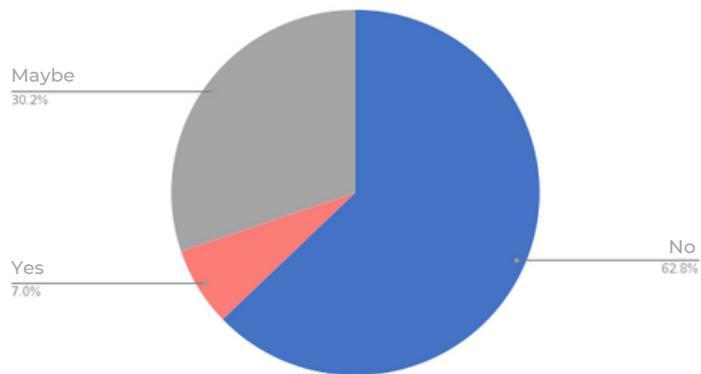


Fig 4: Availability of means and methods to officially report and take measures on VAWP

Based on the following results, 59% of participants estimated that there aren't any means or methods to report the complaint. It has been estimated that in 62.8% of cases no measures were taken (Fig 4, Q6).



Q8: Have you been subjected to violence on social media?

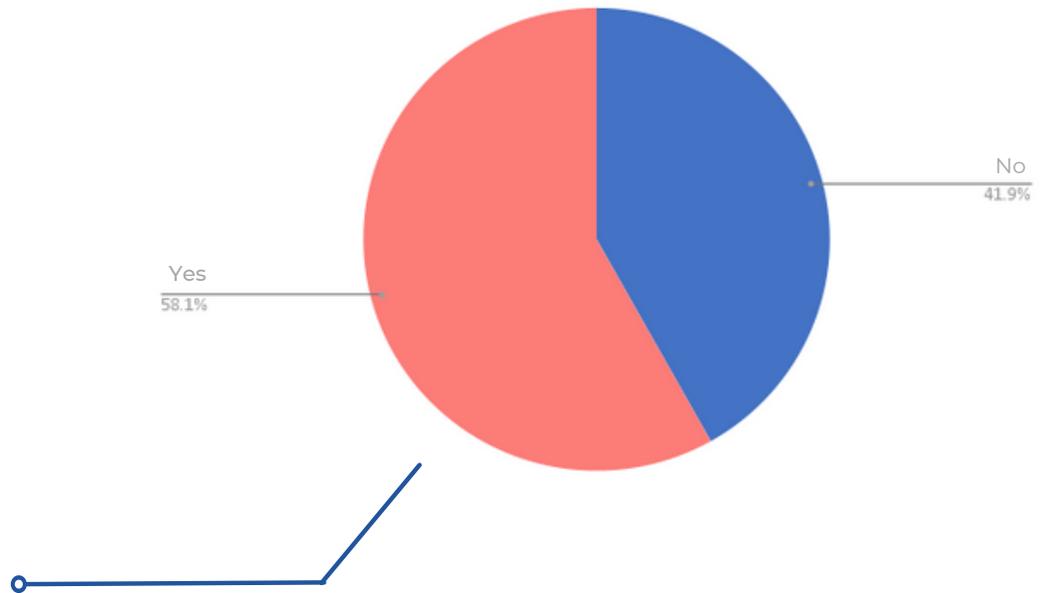


Fig 5: Percentage of women who declared of being subject to VAWP on social media

Q9: Have you closed your social media accounts?

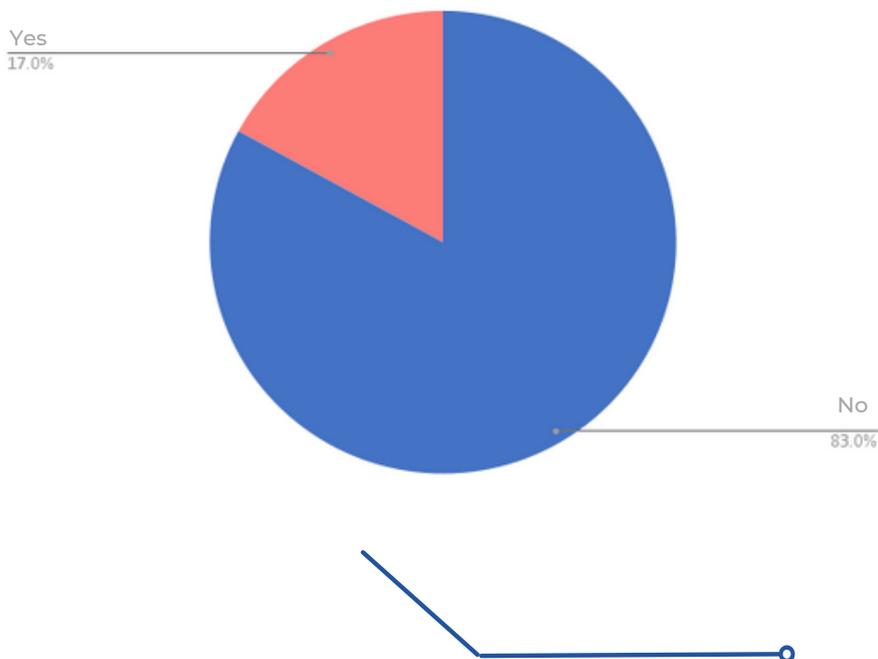


Fig 6: Percentage of women who closed their social media accounts after being subject to VAWP

Although most participants (58.1%) claimed to have been subjected to violence on social media, only 17% said they have closed their accounts. (Fig 5 , 6- Q8, 9)



Q10: Will you continue to pursue your political activity despite harassment?

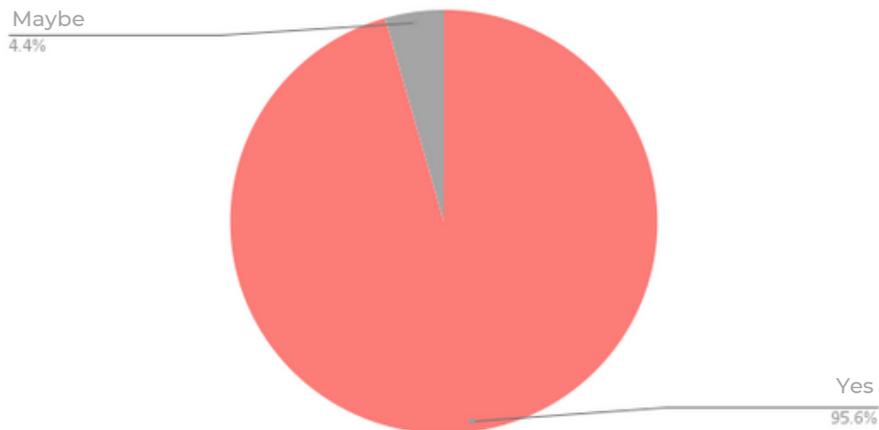


Fig 7 : Percentage of women who will pursue their political activity after being subject to VAWP

And from the violence occurred to the participating women, 95.6% insisted on persisting and continuing their political journey and activity despite the harassment that they experienced. (Fig 7, Q10)

Qualitative Data

In the following sections, we will be narrating the findings of the FGDs.

While for some participants, politics is violent by nature and there is no gender discrimination, most of the participants found that violence against women in politics is more intense and targets women because of their gender.

Participants defined violence against women in politics as any individual or collective action that prevents women from exercising their right to political participation defying their persistence and resilience to overcome structural barriers due to gender.



Women face violence in all aspects of their lives. Historically, patriarchal authority and power marginalized women by assigning them to the private sphere with unfair gender roles and unequal burdens inside the family unit and society while freeing men. The patriarchal structures react violently to the change that women may bring about if emancipated, especially at the political level, traditionally assigned, and dominated by men.

Women’s ambitions are sinful; but when it is a man’s ambition: he is the right man for the right place. - Young activist.

Participants stressed that women’s emancipation frees all members of society and not only women and contributes to the development of the whole society.

During the discussion, participants classified violence into:

1. Online VAWP

Intervening participants highlighted that the October 17th Revolution was a driver to break up the boundaries set by the patriarchal system between the private and public spheres and the gender roles assigned to women. More women engaged in politics especially on social media, more accessible than traditional media. This made them face higher rates of online violence.

Some participants expressed self-censorship to avoid confrontations, but most participants affirmed that replying to attacks would amplify the issue and shed light on rumors, fake news, defamatory videos, and photos and insults. They tend therefore to neglect those types of violence although it psychologically hurts and stresses. They persevered in their work to counter this violence, and to show their “validity and capability”. Some candidates turned the comments into an opportunity to engage with their opponents and send clear messages and explain their points of view.



As to the effects of attacks on social media, they are more amplified to the public, while offline VAWP has deep effects on the personal level, reported the participants.

2. Psychological VAWP

Other participants found that the objectification of women in the media, intimidating women to question their self-confidence, portraying them as emotional rather than assertive, focusing on women's personal life rather than on their political programs, mansplaining their own ideas, aim to assassinate women's characters and to cast a shadow over their political accomplishments. These are types of psychological VAWP. Whereas men are not asked about their personal lives, they are given time to promote their political programs.

Consequently, these discriminatory practices put a ravaging psychological pressure on women and deter their ability to participate in political life by disqualifying women's political abilities and driving voters to abstain from giving them their preferential votes.

3. Sexual VAWP

Sexual violence was highly prevalent among the participants who faced different types of sexual harassment, mockery, and disrespect of their abilities both online and off-line.

Some participants highlighted the amplification of VAWP in their places of work, political parties, universities, and public places due to the intersections of their age and sex. Their physical appearance was pivotal in many discussions. Many were blackmailed, mansplained and man-interrupted. Some journalists claimed that they were exposed to sexualized threats and denial of salary and promotion by their superiors to strip them from their confidence and subjugate them.



“Men think that they are entitled, since they are in positions of power” commented a participant who was also running for municipal elections.

Abusing power and entitlement put women’s careers at risk and therefore inhibit their work in the political field.

Some participating political journalists observed that the rate of aggression is higher than in other fields of journalism. This rate of institutional sexual violence is a structural barrier to the freedom of expression and democracy as it threatens diversity and inclusion of women voices and reinforces the gender division of labor and the gender roles. It enforces patriarchal control of institutions and affects the ability of women to step into the public and political realm that has been exclusively men dominated and constitute therefore a breach to human rights.

As per the quantitative analysis, reporting of these incidences is very low. Only journalists working for well-established institutions, such as Annahar and L’Orient Le Jour groups, and not for emergent media platforms said they felt protected and empowered as they have a reporting mechanism against sexual harassment and abuse.

Other FGD participants pointed out that although they were aware of the law on penalizing sexual harassment, they do not trust the legal system. Repeated impunity and lack of accountability have reinforced their feelings of mistrust and fear as leaking of such complaints might expose them to defamation and stigma risking their career and reputation while perpetrators escape justice.



Many activists highlighted the role of families to face and report violence, especially sexual harassment. Some had the full support of their families while others did not dare to speak about it as their families would blame them to have invoked this act and would forbid them to join the groups or the manifestations.

Although these are crimes punishable on the basis of the articles of the Penal Code relating to infringement, sexual threats and slander, the law penalizing sexual harassment and Law 81/2018, none of the survivors of sexual harassment and of online violence has reported to the authorities because they do not trust the system.

In addition to women, vulnerable groups faced violence based on their gender identity when in politics.

Men with non-conforming gender identities and gender expressions, such as men wearing earrings or long hair, faced sexual violence in the form of filthy jokes, demining comments, bullying, mockery, and intimidation, as they were seen as “feminine” or borrowing female traits and do not comply the perceived traditional attributes of “manhood”. Some participants proposed to discuss gender-based violence in politics rather than violence against women in politics.



4. Social VAWP

Women journalists reported that they had faced violence on social media for conducting reports on social issues considered of unconventional political nature or violating traditional cultural and social norms such as on violence against women, the personal status laws or human rights related to the LGBTQA community or civil marriage. Candidates and activists who dared to discuss those “unconventional” issues faced VAWP as well. They are frequently stalked and distorted by sharing their personal photos without their approval, framing them in fabricated faked contexts with indecent comments to pressure them through their families, in a country where honor still has a primordial place in society.

Some candidates spoke about receiving threats to get fired or threatening to fire their family members from their jobs where opponents are influential.

Alike, political establishments and media institutions were accused of only defending and supporting high profile political personalities or journalists, the “diva”, when attacked by politicians or their affiliated electronic armies.

5. Economic VAWP

Candidates spoke about denying women equal access to resources during electoral campaigns by political leaders. Head of lists and privileged candidates accessed paid media spots, had trained agents, organized campaigning visits, had their electronic and social media team and raised campaigning funding, while less privileged ones, mostly women, did not enjoy the same opportunities.

One of the candidates reported that she saw some of her electoral posters vandalized, another incumbent MP reported the same issue in the news.¹²

12. Annahar. (2022, April 18). Photos- Attack on Paula Yacoubian's elections photos. <https://www.annahar.com/arabic/section/77-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9/18042022043246866>



6. Physical threats

Violence against women in politics developed into physical threats for some candidates. The high political tension in some districts became violent. A participant who is running for the elections found a bullet on her car's windshield in a clear warning message. Her car was vandalized several times.

7. Legal discrimination

For many activists, discrimination against women in the legal framework is a type of violence against women prohibiting them from enjoying full citizenship.

A woman's registry is automatically moved to her husband's registry once she gets married. This affects her political activity and her chances to be elected to any post.

Lack of provisions to provide for protection and equality stimulates more violence. Sectarian quotas contradict constitutional provisions of equality and reinforce discrimination.

One participant questioned the representation of women from religious minorities in the parliament. She highlighted that the sectarian quota system puts higher ceilings for minority women to enter the political sphere dominated by some parties and mainly families who have exclusively represented this group through their male members, justifying the lack of women's involvement by the scarcity of seats allocated to the sect and favoring men over women in political representation.



Storytelling:The experiences with gender-based violence in politics

While there is a wealth of literature on the topic of women's political empowerment, there are scarce resources about cases of existing violence against women in politics in Lebanon. Usually, studies have mainly focused on the numeric increase of women's representation in politics.

As participants have affirmed in this study, speaking up about any type of violence stigmatizes the survivor and undermines women's political career. Guaranteeing anonymity and providing a safe environment for women constituted an incentive for them to share their experiences without fearing stigma during the Focus Group Discussions.

These stories shed light on VAWP in Lebanon and contribute to examining a breach to democracy and a violation of human rights. To document some incidents during the electoral campaign of 2022, participants shared the following personal stories.

1. Similarities of violence between women and gender non-conforming groups

It was remarkable that several participants highlighted the role of patriarchy. "Patriarchy is not exclusive to men; some women reproduce misogynistic behavior by using the same tools and mechanisms of oppression".

Patriarchy does not oppress women only; it oppresses males who are non-conforming to traditional social and religious norms, such as feminist men in extremist environments, and those who express different gender identities too. The aggressors tend to use the Penal law (art 523 & 534) criminalizing homosexuality to enslave and violently abuse victims.

A candidate recounted that he faced political and physical violence for wearing long hair.



“The similarities of semiotic violence and connotations are high between violence targeting women and those men”, he noticed. “Women are calibrated with the societal standards expected of them, while men are calibrated with what is considered the criterion of manhood. While women are slandered for their honor and for their shortcomings in household chores and raising their children, men are taunted for dealing with the enemy, treason, or religious apostasy”, he concluded.

2. Gender identity as incentive of violence

A candidate was threatened to be restricted from joining the electoral list of her political emerging group. The sexuality of her daughter was estimated to put the voting for the list at risk in what her colleagues considered a conservative religious environment. Feminist and human rights organizations lobbied for her to join finally the electoral list by naming and shaming perpetrators.

3. Party members as perpetrators of violence

A. A participant recounted an incidence where she was verbally aggressed by her party colleagues and supporters for signaling a public infraction by another male colleague. Electronic violence did not stop until the party leadership issued a memo restating what she has already signaled and condemning the infraction.

“Despite only asking to enforce the laws, I was attacked by fellow partisans who supported a male colleague who had committed an infraction to the party bylaws, just because I was a woman who expressed her right opinion”, she testified.

B. Another candidate who is a highly ranked political party member shared her experience with psychological VAWP. Partisans and supporters were attacking her with stereotypical demeaning comments that suspect her capabilities and question her abilities to fulfill her assigned role in the party while balancing her work-life duties. She persisted and gained the partisans’ trust and admiration. Her party nominated her to run for the parliamentary elections.



4. Religious authorities and VAWP

Society members, whether from religious or social institutions, might become aggressive when they perceive that women politicians are changing the normative status quo and introducing liberal concepts of women's empowerment. In some cultures, women should be restricted only to the private sphere. Stepping into the public sphere is considered a violation of the gender distribution of roles that exposes women activists to violence, noticed another participant. Some religious authorities supported by more conservative party members led a campaign to ban an NGO affiliated with the women's wing of the party. However, when leadership interferes, partisans and supporters usually comply with the directives and stop their attacks, she confirmed.

5. Disowning women: VAWP by family

A candidate's family issued a statement disowning her for running on a party list opposed to what the family considered her "political line". The candidate said she had taken that step according to her political convictions, which contradicted the family's opinion.

The candidate considered that such violence was evidence of the intolerance and unacceptance and denial that a woman is an independent entity. Women are perceived as subordinate to a husband, family, clan, and sect. They were not allowed to have independent choices nor free expression. This restriction of her freedom is a flagrant violation of her constitutional civil and political rights.

She painfully stressed that she was hit by intense violence because she is a woman breaking up with patriarchy and misogynistic practices. Family disownment is a humiliating violent punishment reserved for those who have committed major crimes such as indecent acts, adultery, murder, or abuse that deserve expulsion from the family.



6. Incremental violence leading to threat

A. A participant who is running for the elections found a bullet in her car. She was exposed to different types of VAWP from physical to psychological and electronic. She claimed she has received threats from political opponents to expel her and her family members from their jobs and to disrupt their livelihood. She did not report because those opponents are highly influential and can escape punishment. She has received numerous comments about her physical appearance but nevertheless she persisted.

B. A candidate claimed that violence is widespread due to political tension. In addition, media platforms tend to increase this tension to get a scoop and higher viewers ratings. She highlighted how she was frequently interrupted by man forbidding her to express her full ideas, deriving a type of psychological oppression.

7. Need a woman candidate to pose for the list photo

A candidate from an emerging political group recounted how she was called by a running list member. “We need a woman on our list”, he told her. That was the only reason to call her, he did not even agree to discuss her role nor the list’s electoral program. She refused to join the list as she does not accept to be a decorative addition.

Another activist relegated this stereotypical situation to the perceived role women usually play on the electoral lists and in the political party. “Women in political parties are expected to carry on social duties”, expressed a participant. They are not assigned leadership or strategic roles. This is how political party leadership perceive them, and that is why they select a female family member to fill up a political position whenever they need to fill this vacancy. She concluded furiously that feudal families had cemented this practice that is dominant in Lebanese politics. Those “feudal” women were not viewed as role models to aspiring activists.



To induce a change, we need to change the gender roles and gender perceptions. Women need to become more confident about the role they can play in politics, they must trust their capabilities, conclude an activist.

Finally, some participants regretted sharing the lack of solidarity among women in the face of the patriarchal misogynistic system and that women contribute to violence against other women in politics.

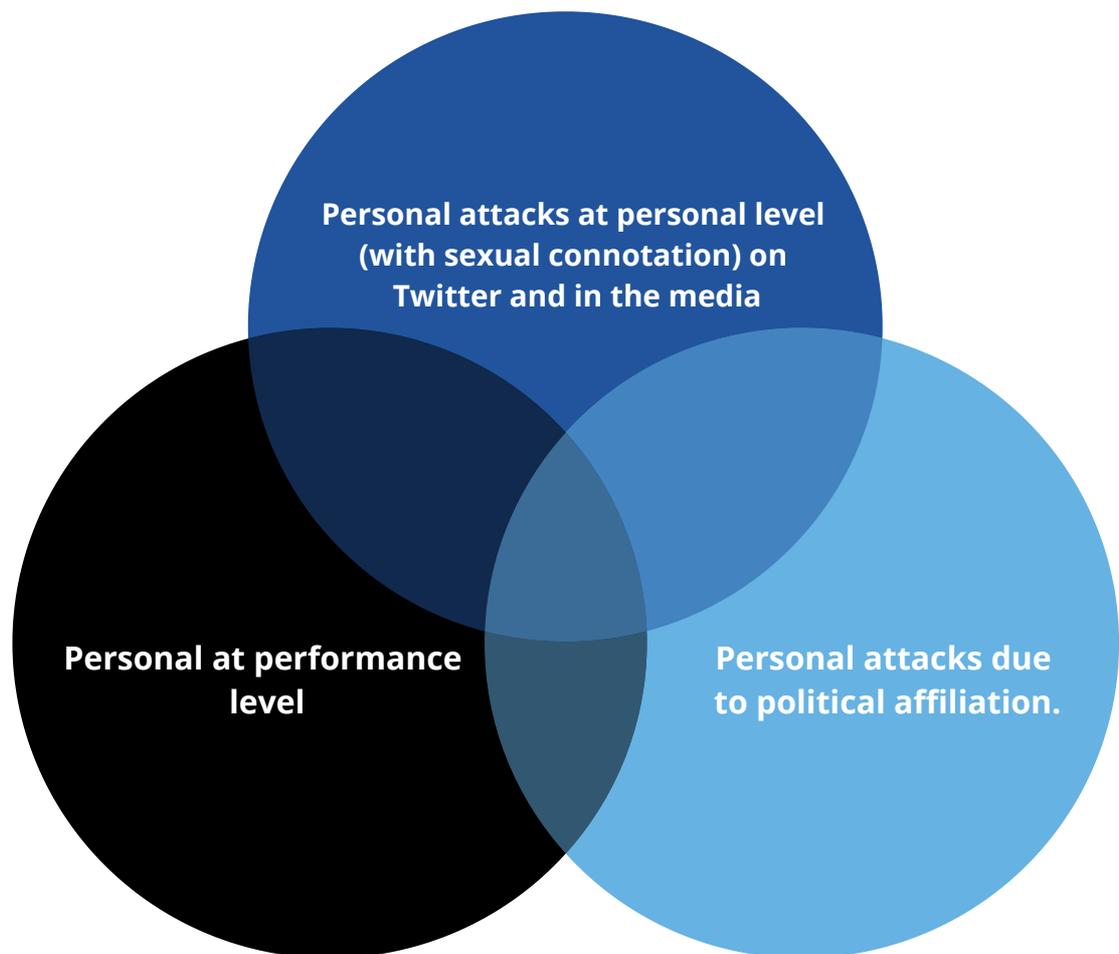
The Supervisory Commission for Elections (SCE)

The Supervisory Commission for Elections was established by Lebanon's electoral law of 2017. The primary role of the SCE is to oversee electoral spending as well as electoral media and advertising. Based on its mandate set out by the law, the SCE is also supposed to spread voter education and strengthen democratic processes. Hence the importance of meeting with a member of the SCE.

A virtual meeting that was held with one member of SCE, Dr Faysal El Kak after the rejection of the only female member, Dr Arda Ekmekji to meet the project's team until the completion of the elections, Dr El Kak stated that SCE takes into consideration a general gender approach in its work, although only one female member holds a position in the Supervisory commission in addition to 11 men. On another note, it is significant to mention the absence of any gender specialist that supports the work of SCE with no gender mainstreaming mechanism or plan.



In addition, the attacks on women candidates and the masculine discourse can be classified into 3 categories:



According to the law and treaties related to VAWP, SCE has no judiciary authority within that context. As per the Supervisory Commission's role, It is not a tribunal and therefore cannot prosecute neither people nor media institutions that accept to publish or mainstream these discourses. However, its role consists and is limited to monitoring media institutions and referring any suspected law violation to the specialized tribunal.

Within that context, the SCE was not approached by the candidates about the discrimination in accessing media platforms: in fact, the SCE did not release any communication to support access of women to media as this activity does not fall within its scope of work. More specifically, the SCE monitors discourses and has the authority to refer to any traditional or electronic media platform to tribunal for any form of violation with the EVAWP being part of the general violent environment during elections.



Therefore, to improve the work and efficiency of SCE, it is recommended the following:

- ➔ Provide the SCE with full independence from the Ministry of Interior at the executive and financial levels.
- ➔ Grant the SCE more executive power to be able to execute prompt decisions, as in France, to avoid late trials and escaping justice that encourage violations.
- ➔ Gender mainstream throughout the electoral process from appointing the SCE members to electoral observation and analysis.
- ➔ Offer the SCE with the financial means to ensure its sustainability and build the capacities of its team to carry on their duties and train electoral teams of supervisors and to educate voters.

What do parliamentarians say about VAWP?

To have a holistic and comprehensive mapping of Violence Against Women in Politics and its perception, we had individual meetings with some Members of the Parliament during the period of June and July.

We have tried to interview members from different blocks and parties to have a representative feedback and inclusive approach as much as possible. Those with whom we have met were the ones who accepted to join this conversation within the tight time framework.

The MPs are (by chronological time of meeting): Dr Najat Saliba & Marc Daou, Dr Inaya Ezzeddine, Judge Georges Okaiss, Taymour Jumblat, Razi El Haj, Halima Kaakour, and Alain Aoun.

All the MPs were aware of the manifestations of VAWP, but some didn't know that it is a barrier to women's political participation and that it is an expanding worldwide problem.



Some of the female MPs recounted their experience with VAWP. One MP reported the sexist and sexualized speech and harassment within the Parliament. Most male colleagues consider it normal to mansplain, man-interrupt, and to make misogynistic comments and jokes.

Another MP reported facing attacks from both men and women on her physical appearance and personal and sexual identity as a riposte to a political stand she expressed.

A third MP claimed that during their preaching in mosques and religious meetings, the sheikhs accused her of disobeying religious principles on the pretext that her principles are secular and contradict religious ideologies.

They also threatened her supporters to deprive them of religious burials if they vote for her. This attests for the direct intervention of religious persons to deprive women of their basic political rights and to threaten them.

All the MPs that we have met committed to work on abolishing discriminatory laws and policies to empower women. They accepted the call to join a trans-block group of advocates and allies of gender equality. They supported drafting an internal code of conduct for the Parliament as per the IPU recommendation to protect women in parliament from all types of violence and to take necessary steps from their side to stop VAWP.



The situation at the international level

“Systemic challenges, especially the increasing levels of violence perpetrated against women in public life and certain enduring harmful norms, require urgent attention, as do specific challenges encountered by marginalized women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. States can facilitate a more inclusive and enabling environment in which all women could participate in public life through more ambitious targets, increased political will, sustainable financing, and gender-responsive institutional arrangements.” – Antonio Guterres ¹³

As enshrined in several international human rights laws, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹⁴ and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,¹⁵ governments need to address inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and women’s equal access to and full participation in decision-making as a critical strategy for achieving equality for women and girls.

Acts of violence against women in politics, constitutes a violation of human rights and of fundamental freedoms, including the obligation to ensure that women can participate in political processes.¹⁶ Violent resistance is exacerbated by democratic backsliding, greater social and political division, and rising inequality.

Despite the rising participation of women in public life, equality is still a long way off. Women continue to be underrepresented in all facets of decision-making, and violence against women is a shadow pandemic as per IPU.¹⁷

13- Report of the Secretary-General to the Commission on the Status of Women Sixty-fifth session 15–26 March 2021 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/377/81/PDF/N2037781.pdf?OpenElement>

14- CEDAW: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>

15- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

16- UN Women. (2021, March 9). Lebanon Must Declare Violence against Women a National Emergency. UN Women Arab States. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/03/lebanon-must-declare-violence-against-women-a-national-emergency>

17- IPU. (2020, December 8). The shadow pandemic: Violence against Women in Politics. Inter-Parliamentary Union. <https://www.ipu.org/ar/node/10881>



In its report, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe¹⁸ recognized that violence against women in politics is often dismissed despite its devastating consequences. It recommended therefore:

1. to raise awareness,
2. to strengthen measures,
3. to revise codes of conduct, and
4. to monitor progress by collecting data regularly.

Looking back at the best practices worldwide, we find that the leading Latino American model is the most replicated worldwide. Gender based violence was narrowly defined and penalized in the legal framework. Back in 2012, when Bolivia adopted its law penalizing VAWP, no international norms existed. Today, VAWP is more recognized worldwide. The Bolivian model relies mainly on the “Policy of diffusion of norms”.

The situation at the national level

VAWP is not well recognized as a barrier to women’s political participation. In Lebanon, women in politics have been facing this rampant and toxic phenomenon, some of them have been vocal about it.¹⁹

In facts, violence against women continues to take place without impunity, normalizing its increasing incidence.²⁰ Several cases of VAWP were reported during parliamentary sessions, the latest being on May 31, 2022, during the election of the Speaker²¹ and then on June 7th, during the election of parliamentary committees.²²

18- DrenJanin, J. ()Fighting sexist violence against women in politics at local and regional level. Council of Europe.<https://rm.coe.int/fighting-sexist-violence-against-women-in-politics-at-local-and-region/1680a061c3>

19- Mariana, M. (2020, August 11). بولا يعقوبيان: ما حدا خصو باعضائي التناسلية [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3h7oMIh-4A&feature=youtu.be>

20- Dismorr, A, Dore-Weeks, R. (2021, March 9). *Lebanon Must Declare Violence against Women a National Emergency*. UN Women Arab States <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/03/lebanon-must-declare-violence-against-women-a-national-emergency>

21- VDL News. (May 31, 2022). بري ليعقوبيان: حاج تفلسفي عليي <https://www.vdlnews.com/news/200548>

22- Al Jadeed News [@ALJADEEDNEWS]. (2022, June 7). Al Jadeed News on Twitter. <https://twitter.com/aljadeednews/status/1534123023086788613?s=21&t=7gmTFIrhHSAQNE-sLXSVLA>



Best Practices / Examples of code of conducts:

Various local and international actors are creating Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), such as the Feminist Platform including groups over 50 NGOs and supported by UN Women, and the Network of Female Arab Parliamentarians with UNDP and the Arab Woman Organization. Those networks should advocate with governmental and civil organizations to do complementary work, put domestic pressure, and support feminist politicians to use their political capital to overcome obstacles to recognize VAWP and adopt legal changes away from customary lip-service.

With the increase in the rates of online crimes, abuses and violations, Lebanon is still lagging behind in modernizing its legislative structure to keep pace with the development speed, despite the passage of the Transactions Act Electronic and personal data No. 81/2018²³ that must be amended to criminalize new types of cybercrime and to include a gender lens.

There is the need for Lebanon to adhere to international treaties for cooperation and coordination with other countries to profit from best and emerging practices, training of security services, and provision of advanced equipment to support their work.

In addition, conducting training courses for judges and lawyers is a must to join efforts in addressing VAWP and to rely on international treaties that Lebanon adhered to.

Furthermore, it is significant to note that prosecuting aggressors without impunity reinforces survivors' confidence in the legal system and incentivizes reporting violations and aggressions.

23- Parliament of Lebanon.(2018). Law No. 81 Relating to Electronic Transactions and Personal Data. SMEX. <https://cyrilla.org/en/entity/vrlqtpwf7ss>



Recommendations

The recommendations are not aimed at increasing the control over citizens or at strengthening the police state. Our goal is to promote women's political participation and to protect human dignity in line with the international frameworks to which Lebanon has committed itself.

However, the following proposed actions should be implemented within the mentioned bodies to improve Women's safety within the political spectrum:

Policy-makers (parliamentarians):

- End discrimination against women in all forms.
- Create a legislative framework that would prevent VAWP, protect women from violence, including online violence, and end the impunity of perpetrators.
- Create a code of conduct for public servants to protect women against all forms of violence.
- Strengthen enforcement mechanisms in the context of VAWP.

Media:

- Promote a violence-free culture and set standards of non-discrimination.
- End harmful stereotypes against women in politics which contribute to perpetuating the cycle of violence.
- Adopt gender-sensitive reporting approaches.
- Implement comprehensive internal policies in media organizations to prevent VAWP among female media professionals and female journalists.
- Allocate more spaces for women in news bulletins and prime time political talk shows and increase their access to media.



Social media platforms:

- Moderate content related to VAWP to prevent gendered disinformation, hate speech, online harassment, cyberstalking, blackmail, and cyberbullying.
- Increase transparency about moderation practices and algorithmic decision-making related to VAWP.
- Engage with civil society and feminist groups to come up with effective solutions to mitigate VAWP online.

Civil society and feminist groups:

- Document cases of VAWP and promote data collection and research on VAWP at national level.
- Establish a reporting mechanism platform to track VAWP.
- Encourage more female victims to break the silence on their own experience of violence and report VAWP cases so that appropriate mitigation measures can be developed.
- Create safe spaces for women where they can share their stories and where their claims will be heard and dealt with promptly.



1 Safeguarding democracy, human rights and rule of Law

Upholding the Constitution and Rule of Law:

- Lebanese parliament should include provisions about VAWP in its code of conducts as per IPU²⁴ and COE recommendations.
- Members of parliament have a duty to ensure that national laws and practices are consistent with these Common Ethical Principles and with international law and their country's treaty obligations.

Protecting Human Rights and Democracy

- Members of parliament shall respect the outcomes of all legitimate democratic elections.
- Sensitization on the effects of VAWP on democracy and the advancement of women's rights and status in society should be raised through networking.
- Members of parliament shall refrain from and denounce the use of violence, threats, or intimidation to achieve political objectives.
- Members of parliament have a duty to ensure effective implementation of international democracy and human rights norms and commitments.

24- Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2016). *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*. IPU. <https://www.ipu.org/file/2425/download>



2 Acting professionally

Acting with Civility and Decorum

- Members of parliament shall act in a manner that is respectful of their fellow members of parliament or citizens, and that does not diminish the dignity of the parliamentary institution.
- There should be more awareness raising campaigns on the VAWP issue to localize it and to build an advocacy campaign around it to put pressure on the legislative body to recognize and penalize it, as participants in the FGD have suggested.
- Political parties should take similar measures and adopt a “zero tolerance policy” to any type of violence against women to empower their female partisans and preserve their “women capital” avoiding leaking pipelines.
- Members of parliament shall exercise civility and use appropriate parliamentary language in political discourse and parliamentary debate.

Treatment of Parliamentary Staff

- Members of parliament shall not discriminate in the hiring or treatment of staff on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion or any other qualifications apart from merit and performance.
- To legally address the issue of VAWP, Lebanon can profit from different provisions in the legal framework on GBV, the penal code and the law penalizing sexual harassment.



3 Valuing diversity and pluralism

Valuing Diversity

- Members of parliament have a duty to create an atmosphere of inclusion within the legislature for all segments of society.
- Members of parliament shall demonstrate zero tolerance with respect to all forms of hate speech or intimidation, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, minority status, or other basis.
- Members of parliament have a duty to ensure reasonable accommodations to facilitate the full participation of people with disabilities in the parliamentary process.

Valuing Political Pluralism

- Members of parliament have a duty to protect space for plural political discourse in the institution and society and shall treat all colleagues with respect, regardless of party or political affiliation.



Conclusion

The disproportionate and often intentional targeting of female politicians and activists has direct consequences for democracy: It has the potential to deter women from running for office, force them out of politics, or cause them to disengage from political conversation in ways that harm their political efficacy.²⁵

The consequences can go beyond democratic process to cause direct harm to the target.

Taking measures to counter this patriarchal “shadow” pandemic is becoming increasingly pressing to avoid significant backsliding of women’s political gains.

Women's movements have been strong drivers of gender equality action. The #MeToo movement and other female-led public protests in addition to the work of international organizations have increased awareness of the effect of gender-based violence on women in all realms of their lives, including the workplace and in politics.

Today, the attitude that sexist remarks or harassment are "part of the job" is no longer acceptable, and many women and men are calling for change in the worlds of media and politics, including calls to enhance women's representation. Nonetheless, despite rising public awareness of the issue, the pandemic of violence against female journalists and politicians persists.

Isn't it about time to start #MeTooPoliticsLebanon to remove stigma and protect women?

25- Di Mecco, L., Brechenmacher, S. (Nov 30, 2020). Tackling Online Abuse and Disinformation Targeting Women in Politics. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics-pub-83331>

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