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# Women's political careers: Leadership in Practice

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**London, June 2021**



### **Acknowledgments**

This report was written by Dr Rebecca Gordon. Interviews were conducted by Shannon O'Connell, Sophia Fernandes, Rosie Frost, Keerti Rajagopalan, Adele Poskitt, Helen Reeve, and Emma Armshaw. WFD would like to thank the 25 women who participated in this project: Rushanara Ali MP, Andrea Leadsom MP, Sharlene Cartwright-Robinson, Laura Dunn, Valentina Minic MP, Hannah Bardell MP, Oksana Syroid, Mimoza Kusari-Lila MP, Hon. Renee Mayaka, Liz Saville-Roberts MP, Nino Gogvadze MP, Hon. Millie Grace Akoth Odhiambo, Dame Eleanor Laing MP, Delyth Jewell MS, Nickie Aiken MP, Claire Hanna MP and those who wished to remain anonymous.

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# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Key findings</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>What factors support and hinder women's candidate selection and election success?</b>	<b>7</b>
Raising your profile	<b>8</b>
Training and Networks	<b>9</b>
Building a connection with your local party	<b>10</b>
Building a connection with voters	<b>11</b>
Careful election campaigning strategies	<b>12</b>
Financing	<b>13</b>
<b>How do women cope with, and adapt to, the realities of political leadership?</b>	<b>15</b>
Networks	<b>15</b>
Strong teams	<b>16</b>
Seeing the bigger picture	<b>16</b>
Strategies for dealing with violence and abuse	<b>17</b>
Navigating gendered norms and responsibilities	<b>19</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>22</b>

## Acronyms

IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
MPs	Members of Parliament
WAFA	Women's Academy For Africa

# Executive summary

**Women's political leadership is important for ensuring that women's perspectives and experiences are included in political decision-making. Over the past 25 years, the overall percentage of women in parliaments has more than doubled, however the pace of progress has slowed in the past five years and women still make up less than a quarter of representatives in legislatures worldwide.**

Whilst theories that explore women's political recruitment are well developed, researchers continue to argue for the need for more research on how women get selected and win positions as political representatives and how they survive the realities of political life. This report focuses on women's experience of candidate selection and elections, and their experience of political leadership in practice through the following questions:

- **How can women political leaders build their profile?**
- **What factors support and hinder women's candidate selection and election success?**
- **How do women cope with, and adapt to, the realities of political leadership?**
- **How can programmes and policies effectively support women in political leadership roles?**

Through interviews with 25 women political leaders in 15 countries, it was clear that women's candidate selection and election success is supported by targeted training that enables women to build up campaigning skills, networks that provide guidance and mentorship based on previous campaigning experience and effective relationships with local parties. Women also noted the importance of creative campaign strategies that helped to raise their profile, particularly through social media and utilising local party connections and skills. Once women entered political leadership roles, they had numerous approaches to adapting to, and coping with, the realities of political life. Most commonly noted was the role of close-knit networks and communities that provided guidance and emotional support and strong teams with diverse skills to navigate challenges. These networks also meant that women retained motivation and set boundaries guided by their overall vision for leadership. However, the key challenges women leaders face, particularly in relation to violence and abuse, result from structural inequalities that require attention beyond the political sphere.

In light of these findings, there is a need for more effective support from political parties and political institutions for women in political leadership roles. There are a number of recommendations about programmes and policies that may improve women's experience of political leadership:

- **Formalise and create adaptive and flexible selection procedures:** Political parties play a fundamental role in supporting women's selection and election, but they need to ensure that selection procedures reduce discrimination faced by candidates, particularly those with multiple responsibilities. In addition, targeted funding is essential to give women candidates independence and reduce the discrepancies they face in access to resources.
- **Long-term and embedded campaign training:** Campaign training should be long-term and, alongside building up specific political skills, it should facilitate connections with local party members, civil society actors and existing political networks that women can work with prior to and during elections, and once they reach political office.
- **Sustained political mentorship and networks:** These are fundamental both for political leaders and for their families, to learn from others' experiences and strategies for coping with the realities of political leadership. The creation of women-targeted networks within parliamentary structures or political parties would also be an important intervention that would benefit women leaders.

However, improved accommodation of caring and additional responsibilities must also be a priority for political parties and political institutions, who should also consider providing practical resources, such as mental health support to address inequalities. In addition, there is also a need for wider support and targeted programmes to address structural inequalities that affect women's experience of political leadership. The need for wider systemic change is essential, particularly in addressing violence against women in politics and addressing gendered norms that influence women's responsibilities and limit their ability to participate in political life. Broader strategies to promote more equal societies must be prioritised and funded.

# Introduction

Women's political leadership is important for ensuring that women's perspectives and experiences are included in political decision-making (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016). Over the past 25 years, the overall percentage of women in parliaments has more than doubled, however the pace of progress has slowed in the past five years and women make up less than a quarter of representatives in legislatures worldwide (IPU, 2019).

Our recent report *Women's Political Careers: Where do women leaders come from?* built on recent syntheses of the literature to argue that women have motivation for political leadership, often coming from a combination of political issues and experiences, exposure to the potential of political leadership to affect positive change and a sense of duty to improve the lives of others. They were supported in acting on these motivations by political apprenticeships that enabled skill development, training, mentorship and networks. This research clearly demonstrated that political leadership is a career for women as much as for men. However, it is evident that the career trajectory for women is significantly different due to the numerous gendered barriers to women entering and staying in politics.

A synthesis of the literature on the impact of women leaders in politics and public life demonstrated that when women are able to exercise political leadership, there are significant benefits for democracy and for citizens (Cowper Coles, 2020). However, women's leadership faces numerous challenges as a result of gendered stereotypes, including those which relate to perceived and actual domestic and caring responsibilities and due to violence and abuse. Therefore, there is a need for further research to understand how political institutions and organisations can respond to these barriers (Cowper Coles, 2020).

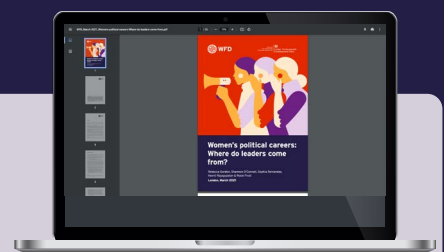
To explore what motivates women to take on political leadership roles, how they prepare for running for office, how they get selected and win positions as political representatives and how they survive the realities of political life, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy interviewed 25 women political leaders from 15 countries. These leaders represent a range of experiences based on their length of time in politics, their involvement in local, devolved or national leadership, their political ideologies, as well as diversity in terms of age and ethnicity.

This report focuses on women's experience of candidate selection and elections, and their experience of political leadership in practice through the following questions:

- **How can women political leaders build their profile?**
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- **How do women cope with, and adapt to, the realities of political leadership?**
- **How can programmes and policies effectively support women in political leadership roles?**



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# Key findings

## Candidate selection and election

- Women's candidate selection and election success is supported by targeted training that enables women to build up campaigning skills, networks that provide guidance and mentorship based on previous campaigning experience, and effective relationships with local parties. Women also noted the importance of creative campaign strategies that helped to raise their profile, particularly through social media and utilising local party connections and skills.
- Political parties play a fundamental role in supporting women's selection and election, but they need to formalise and create adaptive and flexible selection procedures that reduce discrimination faced by candidates, particularly those with multiple responsibilities. In addition, targeted funding is essential to give women candidates independence and reduce the discrepancies they face in access to resources.
- Campaign training should be long-term and, alongside building up specific political skills, it should facilitate connections with civil society actors and existing political networks that women can work with prior to and during elections and once they reach political office.

## Coping with, and adapting to, the realities of political leadership

- Women's approaches to coping to the realities of political life highlighted the importance of close-knit networks and communities that provided guidance and emotional support and strong teams with diverse skills to navigate challenges. These networks also meant that women retained motivation and set boundaries guided by their overall vision for leadership.
- Sustained political mentorship and networks for political leaders and for their families are fundamental. Improved accommodation of caring responsibilities must be a priority for political parties, who should also consider providing practical resources, such as mental health support to address inequalities.
- However, overall, the key challenges women leaders face, particularly in relation to violence and abuse, result from structural inequalities that require attention beyond the political sphere. Therefore, broader strategies to promote more equal societies must be prioritised and funded.

# What factors support and hinder women's candidate selection and election success?

Those interviewed for this report explained that gendered norms and responsibilities and violence and abuse hindered their ability to be selected as a candidate, their likelihood to dropout from this process and their success at election. One of the initial factors that influenced women's confidence in candidate selection was the realities of political party dynamics that affected who was chosen for positions. One interviewee mentioned their hesitation because all those involved in leading the local process were men. Another shared her experience in trying to apply for a council cabinet position and being told to 'wait her turn' as there were councillors who had served for longer who were interested in this role. Political parties therefore present a barrier to women's selection and election success, but through targeted initiatives in particular, they also have a large role to play in supporting women's leadership.

Secondly, interviewees noted how ideas or perceptions about their responsibilities influenced their success during candidate selection procedures. This is supported by literature which explores how women are not taken seriously as candidates due to gendered attitudes towards women (Fawcett Society, 2018). Two interviewees noted how because they were pregnant, or had recently had a child, they were questioned about their capability to become a strong candidate. Interviewees also mentioned some of the challenges of the expectations that surrounded campaigning, such as the requirement for campaigning every single night that made it difficult for those with other responsibilities to partake.

"I was eight months pregnant. I think it suited a narrative that 'she couldn't possibly be doing this at this time.'"

**Claire Hanna MP, United Kingdom**

Interviewees reflected on the need for a culture shift, whereby candidates can set their own boundaries for their campaigns. One interviewee also shared a positive experience of having turned down the opportunity to stand for council, citing childcare responsibilities but being approached again as soon as her situation changed by the local party, who again encouraged her to stand. Additionally, family responsibilities did not stop women from taking the opportunity to stand to be a candidate, or for election as demonstrated by this quotation.

"The day she [my daughter] was born, I was at the final selection interview for the Reading East Seat... someone asked me 'do you have kids?' and I said 'yes, I had one this morning actually!'"

**Andrea Leadsom MP, United Kingdom**

"Financial stability during campaigning is a huge issue and women are expected to work full time jobs, to be financially stable, plus childcare responsibilities."

The financial costs of entering politics, particularly the cost of campaigning, was considered by interviewees to be a large factor preventing women from successfully getting elected. This was attributed to financial instability and insecurity that women faced, which led to reduced time for campaigning or led to them dropping out of the process.

"My selection campaign was gruelling and was at times pretty unpleasant due to the personal attacks from some of the competitors and their campaign teams. Some people had few qualms about inventing lies about me which would then be spread across the community. Character assassinations were commonplace, and this went on for the entire three years that I was a parliamentary candidate before my first election victory in 2010. That said, for every individual that was behaving appallingly, there were hundreds of others who got behind my campaign and supported me, and that is what sustains you, inspires you and motivates you to charge ahead and prove the naysayers wrong."

**Rushanara Ali MP, United Kingdom**

Women interviewees also noted the gendered abuse that they faced during their campaigns for political leadership; this was not just abuse from opponents, but during candidate selection this abuse also came from within women's own party. During the broader campaign, women noted how their families and their appearance were often part of the scrutiny they faced.

From the barriers detailed, it is clear that political parties need to formalise selection procedures and ensure that women are not discriminated against as a result of gendered perceptions, particularly around family and caring responsibilities. Secondly, there need to be stronger mechanisms to protect women from gendered discrimination and abuse from within party structures during candidate selection processes. Finally, funds and subsidies to support women candidates would reduce the gap in resources that hinder women's ability to be selected as a candidate and to successfully win an election.

In addition to the approaches that political parties can take to support women in getting elected, the interviews undertaken for this report provided a wide range of suggestions about potential ways to address these barriers, which are shared below along with other key factors that supported women's success in being selected as a candidate and in winning election campaigns: raising your profile; the importance of training and networks; building a connection with your local party; building a connection with voters; careful election campaigning strategies and financing.

### **Raising your profile**

One of the first steps to getting selected as a candidate for election is for candidates to raise their profile to make sure that they are well known in their political party and in their local community. For many women, this developed naturally as part of their 'political apprenticeships' (Gordon et al., 2021). However, other interviewees noted that raising their profile required a strategic approach, where they had to create their unique selling point, that would support them when speaking to voters in their constituency. It was considered important to be known for their ideas and to take credit for the work they had done so far in the community. Women also noted the importance of building a brand on social media as being a critical way to improve their recognition among potential voters.

"The first thing that really has helped me is just being my own personal brand 'Renee'... and creating a really good space for myself on social media."

**Hon. Renee Mayaka, County Assembly Member, Kenya**

"Every generation is on social media. It is important for them to get to know you personally. You do need to have that base, as people want to know who they're voting for."

**Sharlene Cartwright-Robinson, Former Premier, Turks and Caicos**

However, women also cautioned against starting too early in building up this profile and campaigning, as the process of being selected as a candidate is long and tiring. One interviewee recommended the importance of being strategic, and utilising existing community structures, such as church gatherings or community events to start being 'visible' earlier, without directly referencing ambitions for political office or their campaign. Some had been guided in these strategies to raise their profile as part of training offered for women motivated to enter election campaigns.

### **Training and Networks**

There is a considerable section of the literature that points to the benefits of leadership institutes or training centres that would prepare women with the skills needed for election campaigns (Khan & Naqvi, 2018). Four women interviewed noted the importance of training in supporting them during the candidate selection and election process. For two this was a training course directed at women in leadership in particular, which provided practical tips that proved valuable for campaigning. A training retreat run by Women2Win also covered important skills, such as public speaking, speech writing and social media, that would support women to translate their political motivations into reality.

"One of the very early courses that I went on was thinking about your own abilities and your own strengths and then building a team around you that complements yours..."

Another interviewee mentioned that she had applied to a training programme for candidates in her political party who were under 30, and it had given her tangible examples about how to engage strategically with voters. On this training, candidates were asked questions to prepare themselves to campaign, and it helped her to test out approaches to connect the wider issues that she was campaigning on (climate change) with the local issues (flooding). Training programmes, particularly those that are available prior to women's election campaigns and



that provide ongoing and long-term support have been recognised in previous studies as contributing to building and improving women's campaigning skills (Bari, 2010; Krook & Norris, 2014).

Training also often involved the creation of networks and mentorships to support women during the election process. As political campaigning has long been male-dominated, networks are essential in providing knowledge about and access to campaign funding and political backing; however, numerous studies have demonstrated women's difficulty in accessing networks in comparison to men (Bjarnegård, 2013). Therefore, training which also enabled women to build up networks tackled two areas where women faced disadvantage in election campaigns.

"Within WAFA, we facilitate the exchange of experience... What worked in one region and one country and how can we bring it within the context of another region and another country? I'm not saying that without them I wouldn't have managed to stand for politics, but I also believe that it's far better to have the network."

Connections through networks enabled women to learn from, and exchange ideas with, those with more political experience. One interviewee spoke about their work with the Women's Academy For Africa (WAFA), where women were connected with others who may have the skills they need and that they could then approach for advice and training. This exchange of experience in other contexts, such as the New Zealand Labour Women's Council, was found to boost the careers of many of its members (Curtin, 2008).

"When I started doing selections, I always had a small gang of other candidates who would all text each other, wish each other luck, share ideas, share feedback, share the frustration."

**Andrea Leadsom MP, United Kingdom**

Another aspect of training and networks that was mentioned in multiple interviews was the importance of making connections between women also entering a political career for the first time. Two candidates spoke of the benefit they felt that being part of these networks had brought during their campaigns. One mentioned how having informal routes of support, such as a Facebook group, enabled them to ask

questions of other candidates and this informal support led to a reduction in women dropping out during campaigns. Other studies have noted that women often face barriers to accessing networking opportunities with men, due to them taking place at late hours, or in informal and insecure locations (Tadros, 2014). Therefore, networks that explicitly bring together women in the same position and stage can provide vital support and solidarity as well as an opportunity to share frustration and ideas about how to tackle gendered barriers to power.

Previous campaigning experience was not mentioned as being a supporting factor in most women's interviews, but five interviewees did explain how this had provided a form of training where they built up skills that they drew upon in their election campaigns. One woman had previously worked in the Central Election Commission so had direct knowledge of the political activities associated with campaigning and elections. Other interviewees explained that their previous activism had given them important organisational skills that they built on during their election campaigns. Previous literature acknowledges the fundamental role that women's movements and organisations in particular play in the struggle for equal representation. One of the ways in which they do this is in providing informal training of campaigning for women aspirants that will develop their political skills set for future leadership (Shvedova, 2015).

"Definitely build those networks. I found that when it came to the election, people would volunteer for me on the basis of a range of different campaigns I'd worked on over the years."

## Building a connection with your local party

Building a connection with the local party and a strong foundation within constituencies was considered to be a crucial factor in women's successful candidate selection and election campaigns. In particular, this was relevant as party members' knowledge of local issues and their experience working on campaigns in these locations provided essential expertise throughout this process. One interviewee shared how having long-standing local activists from different parts of the constituency as part of her campaign meant that she was able to build up in-depth knowledge about each area and extend her personal connections with members of those communities facilitated by these activists.

"You face fewer challenges if you create a good foundation within your constituencies... It is essential for a political party to support women."

Another interviewee spoke of the support from the constituency party in developing and driving her campaign strategy, as they were able to build on their previous experience of running campaigns in that area. Others referred directly to the skills and expertise that local party members had contributed to their campaigns, such as filmmaking, graphic design and organising door-knocking. As one interviewee summarised, it is essential to understand the experience and expertise within local party structures, and to foster this through relationships and involving these people in the campaign. However, this had to be a two-way relationship. Two interviewees explained that when they asked for support, they also encouraged local party members to ask questions and share their perspectives on approaches to policy, meaning that as candidates they also had deliverables and were accountable to those that supported their campaign.

"In the election just passed, we sat down quite systematically and looked at the networks I had available, or where you'd built up relationships and tried to find ways to activate them, and it really worked."

**Claire Hanna MP, United Kingdom**

Strategies to build up relationships with local party members were shared by numerous interviewees. One reflected on the importance of being helpful and supportive to others in the local party, assisting their campaigns and initiatives as a way to build relationships that may lead to reciprocal support in women's own campaigns. Another supported this perspective, stating that it was essential to be really hands-on in local party activities and campaigns in order to actively build relationships.

"The people really care about what they do. Mobilising the members and support was really easy. And actually, the love and warmth they showed me was just absolutely mind blowing; we have built a wonderful relationship..."

However, others spoke of the challenges they faced in building a supportive relationship with their local party. For example, in one interviewee's experience the incumbent did not support them and fought actively against their candidature. For another interviewee, a tense and combative candidate selection process had led to friction between different party factions. This meant that when they were successfully nominated, they still faced a lot of resistance from local party actors from other factions, which continued during their time as a candidate. This interviewee explained how much time they had invested in bringing all local party members around to their campaign but recognised that some would not provide support and so expressed the importance of channelling energy and time towards those that actively wanted to contribute to their election campaign.

## Building a connection with voters

A fundamental part of becoming a political leader is building a connection with a geographic base of voters, in order to get selected as a candidate, and win an election. Previous research has emphasised the importance of women having a strong community base, in part because it can offset the relative resource disparity between female and male candidates (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2018). Women interviewed shared a number of approaches that they used to build connections with voters.

“Getting involved in your local community and local organisations... people want those who will get involved with local organisations and things like that but can also still stand up in parliament and speak.”

**Hannah Bardell MP, United Kingdom**

Firstly, over half of women interviewed had previously been, and remained involved, in local community organisations during their selection and election. Seven interviewees mentioned that their voluntary work meant they had been able to build up strong connections with those who would be involved in candidate selection prior to this happening. They gave two reasons to explain why this was beneficial. Firstly, because voters wanted someone who will get involved in their community and secondly, it enabled women to know the issues that the community are facing, and then target their policy and campaign approaches to tackle these. Previous research has demonstrated that on average women work harder than men to represent their constituencies (Cowper-Coles, 2020); however, building up connections that did not previously exist during the selection and campaigning period required reaching out to stakeholders within the communities and making partnerships, with schools and health clinics for example. One interviewee explained how in spite of not having been involved in a community organisation directly, their social media activity had really helped them to build connections at the community level.

“The opportunity came up for the city of London and Westminster. I had a track record and good reputation as councillor. So, I got the nomination on Sunday and the Prime Minister announced the election on Tuesday, and the rest is history.”

**Nickie Aiken MP, United Kingdom**

Women also noted the benefit of building a profile through local politics before seeking leadership at the national level in their area. Many referred to their track record as enabling them to have been known within the community, but also having ‘proved’ themselves already. This had the potential to challenge some of the gendered perceptions about women’s leadership that may hinder women during elections.

Living in, or family connections to, the constituency was also noted in six interviews as having been vital in supporting women to build up their base in the local area. One major reason why this helped women to build connections was because of their deep knowledge of the area and the issues that were most important for constituents. Even if they were not from, or their family were not from the constituency, women emphasised the necessity to live and work in the community prior to selection and election. One interviewee noted how their key strategy was to engage with a diverse and representative group from the area, in order to get the richest information and advice. They explained how they had been advised not to meet people in formal settings, but to come and ‘meet the family that is bereaved’ in order to reach people where it matters.

“I knew the demographic very well. When I knocked on the door, people said, ‘do you know that story’ and I did, I could talk to them. I also decided on that campaign, it was important to keep things local. You need to drill down on what’s really important to people, what’s happening in their local areas. Politics is all about those local relationships.”

This integrated and person-centered approach to campaigning was something that many interviewees noted and therefore should be integrated within political party campaign training. Additionally, political parties also need to plan careful strategies to ensure that women candidates are supported to build relationships within their constituency or geographic base.

Whilst candidate selection and election are the first stages of political leadership, women also gave advice on how to maintain a connection with their geographic base to ensure that they can get re-elected. The primary message from three interviewees was to remember constantly that their constituents are their boss, and that this was centered in their work. One woman honestly reflected on the fact that she did not get re-elected because she had not engaged in local politics in the way that was expected of her, and similarly, other interviewees reinforced the value of openly and continually communicating with voters about the work they were doing, explaining why they had made the decisions they had, and being open to receiving feedback from the community.

“My constituents are my boss, the people that elected me. You have to remember who your boss is, and you have to deal with them and their issues first. If you do that, you find yourself building up a base of people who won't necessarily always agree with you, but they at least respect your position and support you being there and want you to stay there.”

Seven interviewees directly referred to the work they do to maintain their link with their constituents by being prepared to speak to people at all times, giving examples of conversations at the shops, at the school gates, holding surgeries or going door-knocking. This gave them confidence that they were up to date with their constituents' perspectives. Others mentioned that this did not just mean working within their own party networks, but that being a responsible constituency leader meant having good connections and cooperation with other parties and groups within that region. A big part of the job is about 'winning people over' through-coalition building.

“I really worked 24/7 to reach out to people and then to just earn their trust.”

**Nino Gogvadze MP, Georgia**

## Careful election campaigning strategies

Women's experience of winning elections was often attributed in part to the design of careful election campaigning strategies. These were developed in a number of ways. Firstly, women recognised the importance of involving and learning from local party members, as noted above. One interviewee detailed the time she had spent prior to finalising her campaign strategy with local community members. She had actively tried to avoid those who were considered opinion leaders, and instead focussed on engaging directly with local groups to understand their issues and work with them directly.

“I got some people to look at the data, acknowledging that there's no way we can knock every door in six weeks. We had to be really targeted so we looked at how people voted in the referendum and things; that was a huge lever.”

Secondly, women referred to the importance of research and accessing data to determine what the key issues were, and what was feasible in terms of outreach and communication, so that targeting voters was done in a strategic way. For example, one interviewee spoke of the time they spent on the phone, calling thousands of constituents, and utilising the local party base to knock on as many doors as possible in order to deliver the key messages that people cared most about in the community.

Finally, thinking creatively about strategies for campaigning was considered to be particularly important for women candidates who may not have as prominent name recognition or resources for elections (Cowper Coles, 2020). Related to 'raising your profile' one interviewee noted how her approach included a large digital campaign with screens around the constituency to encourage name and face recognition. Another woman reflected on how she had identified a controversial story happening in the constituency at the time of the election and focused on campaigning on this in order to tackle this issue, but also to raise awareness around her leadership. Overall, these interviewees supported the evidence that women have fewer resources for campaigning than male candidates; however, these locally driven and creative approaches enabled them to succeed.

## Financing

Political campaigning is costly in terms of money and time and generally women are considered to have fewer financial resources than men (Rosenbluth et al., 2015). In particular, the affordability of campaigning and the ability to live sustainably whilst campaigning is a key challenge affecting women's ability to enter political leadership roles (Bauer, 2012). For interviewees in this research, the challenges related to financing started at the outset of their journey into political leadership. For example, one interviewee explained how she took six months off work, which meant she had to make use of some savings that she had been planning to use for a house deposit. However, she was keen to emphasise that this was not the model she would recommend, as it would be better if women did not have to give up their incomes or they were given greater financial support to subsidise their campaigning. Working whilst campaigning was also noted by interviewees as being the way in which they managed to support their election; however, this increased the number of responsibilities that women had as a result and reduced their available time for campaigning. This experience of balancing campaigning with caring duties and a second job is unfortunately a common experience for women candidates (Ng & Ng, 2008).

"I was basically doing two and a half jobs for three years and building a campaign with hundreds of people, trying to fundraise. Nobody tells you this, but you don't get much help when you are at the start of an election campaign."

**Rushanara Ali MP, United Kingdom**

Many women interviewed held fundraising campaigns to support their candidate selection and election campaigns. One mentioned a fundraising dinner, whilst others utilised their networks from previous activism and fundraising to hold locally organised fundraisers for their campaign. Those in high profile and marginal seats in particular noted how they had to persuade party donors to support them, especially if they were selected well in advance of the election, due to the need to fund lengthy and sustained campaigns. Evidence has also demonstrated that where specific funds or fundraisers have been set up to help women candidates run, they have mostly been effective at narrowing the gap in campaign resources between male and female candidates (Rosenbluth et al., 2015).

"My party hasn't been flush. I established a fundraising mechanism through a group where volunteers pull pints at festivals and raise money for elections!"

**Claire Hanna MP, United Kingdom**

Others explained that they had asked local party members to contribute, which represented a slower approach to building up campaign funds. One woman acknowledged that she wouldn't have been able to raise the required funds without the support of a local party organiser who was extremely skilled at fundraising and who taught her that 'little and often' was the best approach to financing; this required constant communication and gratitude to those regular contributors. Four women referred directly to financial support from their local parties as being an essential factor in their success, but this was more commonly referred to by women who were part of large and financially stable political parties. Women from smaller parties noted the challenges they faced in accessing financial support and how they had adapted their fundraising strategies to make the most of supporters who were willing to give their time to build up campaign funding.

"I have used my savings, and I also got a few friends to sponsor my campaign. But that is a challenge for me, as I come from a human rights background and I do not like sponsorship that compromises my freedom."

**Hon. Millie Grace Akoth Odhiambo MP, Kenya**

Financial contributions from political party donors and other individuals were also considered to be problematic in some cases, due to the fact that it could compromise women's autonomy. Two interviewees reflected on this challenge, with one cautioning women against this approach, because people may believe that the candidate owed them something in return for financial support. This was also considered to be important after the election, as in some contexts there were concerns by candidates that taking money from donors contributed to a stereotype that those in politics are corrupt. In response to this concern, one interviewee stated that they preferred to pay for their own election campaigns. Whilst this potentially reduced pressures that may affect women once they were elected, this is only an approach that was available to women candidates with individual or familial financial stability.

“I’ve always wanted to be independent and be able to pay my own way.... So, I’ve always wanted to pay for my own campaigns.”

**Andrea Leadsom MP, United Kingdom**

Another approach mentioned by three women interviewed, was developing a crowd-funder, using popular sites such as ‘GoFundMe’ in order to benefit from small donations from supportive individuals through a more direct grassroots approach rather than relying on political party donors or larger donations. This was considered to be an important route through which women built up funds, and support for their campaigns. However, this was not always a simple approach, as campaign financing rules in some contexts meant they had to ask for a lot of information about every contributor which is more difficult through this more indirect approach to fundraising.

“I’ve gone more into the grassroots funding. So, having every donation count and everyone who feels like contributing can contribute. There’s always a way to make it more creative and reach out to other people and creative individuals who are not there only for commercial purposes. It helped me a lot.”

**Mimoza Kusari-Lila, MP and Party Leader, Kosovo**

One of the key tactics mentioned by women as a useful approach to overcome barriers related to campaign expenditure was to utilise networks and resources offered by supporters. They had integrated these into their campaign strategy; one woman mentioned that she made use of the talents of a graphic designer, or of people’s desire to deliver campaign material. Women also devised approaches to campaigning that did not require vast spending and referred to creative use of social media and building up a profile in that way.

“I was very fortunate that a supporter, a graphic designer by trade, helped me with my selection materials. I wanted to pay him, but he wouldn’t accept it.”

**Hannah Bardell MP, United Kingdom**

Some interviewees also noted the supportive strategies that some political parties had begun to introduce. For example, Women2Win give financial support to all women who stood as a candidate, as they had received feedback that the expense of election campaigns strongly deters women from running. This approach has also worked in other contexts; the Democratic Party of Japan’s water and seed programme, which targeted women with half of their running costs, led to more women candidates entering politics (Gauder, 2012).

“I don’t have money for access to childcare... That means that we support women who may need finances for childcare so that’s not a barrier. Previously we’ve worked to champion job shares and things like that.”

Additionally, one interviewee explained how their party was trying to change the normative approaches to leadership through championing job shares so that all candidates are able to balance generating an income and their campaigning strategies. This demonstrates the fundamental role that political parties can play in reducing or subsidising the costs of campaigning or making sure that other supportive mechanisms are in place to reduce women’s financial vulnerability in entering elections. However, more research is needed on the effectiveness of these measures (Cowper Coles, 2020).

# How do women cope with, and adapt to, the realities of political leadership?

Challenges that women face as political leaders, particularly related to violence and abuse, and to competing pressures and responsibilities as a result of gendered norms are well documented (Cowper Coles, 2020); however, the mechanisms and strategies that women political leaders use to cope with, and adapt to, these realities of political life have been afforded comparatively little attention in the literature. Women interviewed mostly spoke about their approaches to coping with leadership through three key areas: the importance of networks, of having strong teams and of 'seeing the bigger picture.' They also gave specific advice about how to navigate the two major challenges associated with women's political leadership: violence and abuse and multiple responsibilities.

## Networks

In addition to their role in supporting women to enter political leadership and getting through selection processes and election campaigns, networks were considered to be essential to navigate the realities of political life. There is evidence on the importance of alternative networks or designated spaces for women in politics, with some studies specifically advocating for the development of women-only bodies that connect women politicians and women's organisations (Palmieri, 2013). Indeed, interviewees reflected on the importance of making connections with other political leaders and civil society actors, building networks that extended beyond political parties and national boundaries (Cox, Corbett & Spark, 2018). One interviewee stressed the need for these networks to include actors outside of politics, who can provide guidance and expertise to support women in navigating issues that come up while they are in office. This is in line with previous research that demonstrated the need for women politicians to have strong links with civil society to support their political advancement (Clavero & Galligan, 2005).

"I had relations with local and international politicians, which guided me on how to become an effective politician. The relationship, the connection, the networks locally and internationally helped me to become very, very effective."

Networks of women politicians were noted as being an essential resource, both in the support they provided when there were challenges, but also in being able to collaborate and converse on key issues facing women in political leadership. These networks also provided opportunities for women leaders to raise their profile and to get involved in issues. For example, one interviewee reflected on the work of WAFA in supporting women leaders to access the media, creating more visibility and showcasing the work of political women. Accessing ongoing mentorship

"Having supportive women around makes you stronger and more confident because you see that more or less you face the same challenges. When you work together on these challenges in an environment which is hostile, it's very important to work and be stronger together."

**Nino Goquadze MP, Georgia**

and support, particularly when networks included women who had been in positions for longer and had already dealt with challenges that newer politicians were facing was valuable; as one interviewee noted, important advice and guidance was provided through a WhatsApp group with other women MPs.

Strong networks with male politicians were also considered to be vital, particularly in contexts where men still held the majority of senior leadership positions. Their guidance in how to enter and navigate these positions was crucial for women who were entering these roles for the first time.

"I was lucky to have wise mentors with great experience in our Democratic Club of deputies. That unconditional support I felt is something I am really grateful for... We need support from our male colleagues."

**Valentina Minic MP, Montenegro**

It has been suggested that improving women's access to networks to support their leadership might involve capitalising on existing groups and using them in different ways (Cowper Coles, 2020). In this way, specifically targeting women with connections to civil society and to existing political networks is an important part of supporting their political role. In addition, the creation of women-targeted networks within parliamentary structures or political parties would also be an important intervention that would benefit women leaders.

## Strong teams

One factor that was essential in enabling women to thrive in political life was having strong teams or, as one interviewee labelled them, 'ecosystems.' Interviewees spoke about the importance of surrounding themselves with people whose opinions may diverge from their own, but which they trusted. Additionally, ensuring that they are surrounded by staff with both the specific skills needed for their representative role, as well as wide-ranging and diverse experience and expertise enabled women to best serve their constituents and adapt to the multiple demands of political life. Previous studies have also emphasised the positive influence of having the right staff, as women politicians are often held to a higher standard than men, and therefore need confidence in their teams to overcome these hurdles (Carlin, Carreras & Love, 2019).

"I have excellent staff whose specific set of wide-ranging skills make it possible for me to do things. We've come across issues important to constituents, like aviation noise. We started a local noise group, met with the Civil Aviation Authority. Having staff with a very specific set of skills allows me to really dig deep into an issue."

**Hannah Bardell MP, United Kingdom**

Building strong teams within political parties was also a factor that benefited and enabled women to adapt to the realities of political leadership. Many women interviewed spoke about their active role in political parties, such as launching recruitment drives and developing systems to encourage member engagement. Two interviewees singled out the role of strong political party teams that supported their leadership role, but they did acknowledge the importance of actively asking for support and of identifying certain actors within these structures that were likely to strengthen their work and their ability to adapt to some of the more formal structures associated with political life.

"A political party is like a vehicle, so if you don't have a vehicle you're operating in, then you're in an empty space. You don't get to have access to even mentors and that can influence how you do your work."

**Hon. Renee Mayaka, County Assembly Member, Kenya**

These experiences demonstrate that political parties need to better support transparent and open access to resources and members that would facilitate women identifying supportive actors within these structures.

## Seeing the bigger picture

"What is more important is you have to set boundaries very, very early. This is my family day. No calls unless London Bridge is burning down. You have to establish those boundaries, keep your family intact."

**Sharlene Cartwright-Robinson, Former Premier, Turks and Caicos Islands**

In dealing with the realities of political life, women interviewees reflected in different ways on the value of always seeing the bigger picture. One way in which this manifested itself was the importance of setting boundaries around their time. For some women this specifically related to the efficacy of maintaining a healthy work life balance and managing multiple domestic responsibilities. One interviewee spoke about their strategy of blocking out hours to spend with their family. For another, it was about establishing a routine that was consistent and balanced the multiple responsibilities that they had as a political leader.

"Just believe in yourself and in your ability to improve society and do not pay attention to bad people and comments. This path is not a path with roses, you can come across various situations. I think that women who want to be successful in politics must be prepared to fight for their rights as well. So just be steady, fight against all forms of injustice, inequality, and violence, be a hard worker and believe in success."

**Valentina Minic MP, Montenegro**

Another perspective on seeing the bigger picture was how central interviewees considered it to remind themselves of their political purpose and having the confidence and determination to deliver their vision. This strategy for coping with political life was referred to in different ways by nine interviewees. Some stressed that confidence in their ability and vision was a key attribute that political leaders need to nurture, whilst others referred to their passion related to what can be achieved through politics as



being a driving force. Overall, maintaining focus on political goals and having a strategic plan to achieve them were considered essential parts of negotiating the challenges associated with leadership.

Seeing the bigger picture also encompassed remaining accountable and engaged with the people that political leaders are representing, with an emphasis on the importance of continually consulting and talking to constituents, and being transparent in decision-making, as this was a key part of taking up an opportunity in public service.

“I’d say, remember the bigger picture, remember that you are called if you are given the opportunity to serve, serve with all your might.”

**Sharlene Cartwright-Robinson, Former Premier, Turks and Caicos Islands**

Finally, the significance of maintaining life outside of politics was noted by five women interviewed as a mechanism to maintain motivation and also to recuperate from the struggles of political life. For some, this meant concentrating and focusing on their faith or their spirituality. One interviewee reflected on the importance of mindfulness in maintaining a connection to what was going on outside of their political leadership role. For others, physical exercise and being outdoors was essential. One woman explained how she had kept her job as a lecturer which had supported her to have a balance with her political life. Finally, the importance of maintaining connections and friends from before getting into politics as a way through which to remember and maintain the bigger picture was underlined.

“I think for me to cope with the stress, I lean heavily on the physical and mental practice of mindfulness. I just read an essay by Audre Lorde about the connection between the spiritual and political... I would love to bring a spiritual practice of mindfulness into a political sphere.”

Understanding women’s strategies for dealing with political life is another area with limited research, but from these perspectives it is clear that ensuring that women have time and space to engage with leisure and personal pursuits is an important aspect of supporting their leadership.

## Strategies for dealing with violence and abuse

Nearly all interviewees mentioned their own personal experiences of wide-ranging abuse they faced as a result of their political leadership. These ranged from attacks on their character, rape and death threats, to physical assault within the parliament building. Violence and abuse were not solely gendered, and those interviewed explained the racialised violence that they and other women of colour had experienced, and homophobic abuse that they had been subjected to. All these threats had severe physical and psychological consequences, and violence directed against women in politics is increasingly a reason why women do not want to enter in the first place, or why they are leaving (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2020; Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019). Unfortunately, there has been limited evidence on approaches to tackling violence and abuse against women in politics (Cowper Coles, 2020). Institutional and national level approaches are needed, such as comprehensive legislation, awareness campaigns and better policies by media companies where abuse is often levelled at women.

In spite of the need for these structural changes, there were five different strategies that interviewees utilised for dealing with violence and abuse: naming the problem; reporting; ignoring and blocking; separating personal attacks and legitimate feedback; and remembering your purpose.

“The parliament’s gender equality council work on problems women politicians face, such as attacks... that’s not a solution to the problem, but when you reveal the problem, and you make it public and discuss it publicly it is very important. It is not a solution, but maybe half a solution.”

**Nino Gogvadze MP, Georgia**

Firstly, women noted the importance of naming the problem and speaking out about the realities of violence and abuse faced by women in politics. For example, one interviewee reflected on the abuse that Diane Abbott MP experienced, and how she had spoken up in the media and in parliament and detailed and explained the abuse and the impact it had.<sup>1</sup> This did not stop the abuse, but it raised awareness, and the interviewee mentioned that this had led to greater support because people understood the extent of the problem. In another example, an interviewee shared her experience of homophobic abuse she received

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2017/jul/12/diane-abbotts-powerful-speech-describing-mindless-online-abuse-video>

from another politician; she noted that because it was on the record, it felt even more important to take a stand and to publicly condemn this incident in the media.

The second approach mentioned by interviewees was the importance of cataloguing and reporting abuse formally and taking steps to ensure there are formal safety mechanisms in place. Again, this did not directly tackle the violence that women faced but making sure that staff never spoke with constituents alone, that they always had alarms, and that women political leaders' houses were equipped with safety equipment was sadly detailed as a necessary strategy to deal with the abuse they faced. Others noted that cataloguing the abuse and reporting it to the police were part of their overall strategies.

"My 14-year-old foster son had to learn how to pick up the post with plastic gloves so as not to get his fingerprints on it... Part of my therapy for dealing with this was to catalogue every single incident."

Thirdly, women had multiple practical strategies for reducing the impact of abuse they received. Four noted how they do not read the abuse that is sent to them, with their social media accounts managed by staff members, and letters filtered before they receive them. Particularly on social media, women mentioned their approach of 'ignoring' or 'blocking' to reduce the level of abuse they were having to experience on a daily basis. One interviewee shared that she always replies to people once, unless they are specifically rude or aggressive, but that she also felt it was completely within her rights to block people. Six women directly referred to this function on Twitter, and how important it was for filtering the content they received.

"A lot of it, and it shouldn't have to be, but it is around filtering the content that comes to you. I no longer have active notifications on my phone because you could just be making your dinner, watching TV or sitting on the bus and get some really abusive comment that just jumps out of your phone."

**Claire Hanna MP, United Kingdom**

"Most of the criticism is personal, and at first it sounded so brutal to me...., I found at some point an approach to dealing with it. I realised that actually they don't criticise me, but my position... I just am treated like a coat. They criticise my coat and I can change my coat, but I'm still myself and it doesn't touch me... it helped."

**Oksana Syroyid, Party Leader, Ukraine**

A fourth approach that women had for dealing with the negative impact of abuse was to try and separate personal attacks from other forms of interaction, such as legitimate feedback and concerns. One woman explained how she felt there had been a large shift in recent years, with a move away from a conversation about ideas to a personal attack on the person who holds those ideas, which had hugely influenced women's ability to remain in politics. The personal attacks had a hugely negative impact on women, with some reflecting on how they tried to ignore this form of attacks. Others noted that they tried to differentiate between informed and reasoned criticism, which they tried to be open to and responded to. Overall, they explained that they had decided a clear approach to choosing where they took their criticism from, and which criticism they understood to be personal and thus not worth engaging with. This approach is potentially in line with some research which has suggested that women politicians are targeted because they are politicians and because they are women, and that there is a need for a wider focus on election and political violence in general (Bjarnegård, Håkansson & Zetterberg, 2020).

Finally, five women interviewees specifically mentioned how their political purpose supported them to cope with the abuse that was part of political life. In one case, an interviewee reflected on her strategy to remind herself of her purpose in politics, and subsequently avoid certain political situations in her party which generated conflict and abuse. This allowed her to create her own space to remain focused on her own political vision. Another also mentioned how remembering her purpose for political leadership enabled her to deal with the backlash that she was receiving.

“You’re going into politics because you are passionate about a cause or causes... That is the thing that you nurture, because it gives you the strength to carry on when you get the abuse, because it is a reason to reject the abuse.”

**Liz Saville Roberts MP, United Kingdom**

The necessity of family support also cannot be overstated. One interviewee explained that in the aftermath of physical assault, it was her husband who provided the required physical and mental support. As one interviewee also shared, the importance of having a thick skin and dealing with abuse is part of her political reality but having support from friends and family helped. However, these represent coping strategies rather than tackling the problem of violence and abuse itself, and all women noted the difficulties that came with trying to avoid and cope with these barriers. Therefore, violence against women in politics requires a systemic societal shift, and all governments should prioritise legislation and policies to respond to this issue, but awareness and consciousness-raising is also needed to try and tackle the problem at source.

“We have to learn how to live with the backlash. There is a Kiswahili saying, ‘a tree that bears good fruits experiences a lot of stone throwing, because if people want to block the food, they have to throw stones.’ That is comforting, but the reality of backlash is still there.”

## **Navigating gendered norms and responsibilities**

Gendered responsibilities and norms affect women’s experience of political leadership. Similar to violence and abuse, this should not be down to individual women leaders to solve but is part of wider structural inequalities that need to be challenged at the institutional and societal level. Overall, evidence has shown that when societies are more equal, more women are able to enter and stay in politics. Cowper Coles (2020) highlighted the need for wider social shifts to bring about a gendered balance in terms of responsibilities but argued that the main impetus is ensuring that political institutions are better set up to accommodate political leaders’ family responsibilities (Campbell & Childs, 2017).

The impact of parenthood on politics has been explored in recent studies (Thomas & Bittner, 2017), with clear evidence that women face a double-edged sword where voters tend to prefer candidates with children, due to stigma attached to single women (Tadros, 2014), but that women then face multiple responsibilities as a parent and as a successful candidate or politician (Teele et al., 2018).

“I would be worried about sitting in a council meeting at eight o’clock at night thinking ‘Oh my god, when is this going to end and when am I going to get back home?’”

Numerous interviewees noted the challenge of navigating family responsibilities and politics, particularly having children and the barriers it created in getting selected as a candidate and in the ‘juggling’ they had to do to balance their political and familial responsibilities (Britton, 2005). However, as noted at the outset of this report, many did have children at the same time as entering and being involved in political life. In six interviews, women explained the importance of having strong family networks as being key to enable them to manage these responsibilities. In particular, women referred to having trusted family members, including partners, parents and parents-in-law who were able to provide stability and consistency in childcare having assisted them to thrive in their political role. In addition, women also explained the importance of routine and of setting boundaries to ensure that there was time dedicated to their family responsibilities.

Other aspects of family life, such as relationships also faced tests as a result of the reality of political life, with four interviewees reflecting on the large number of divorces among those active in politics. One interviewee shared how loneliness was a large part of their experience of political leadership thus far, especially when they have access to information that they cannot share with anyone. If they do not have a partner, this is lonely, and if they do have a partner, they need to accept that there are some aspects of their life that cannot be shared. There is very limited research that has looked at the emotional and psychological strain that comes with political leadership, but these experiences highlight the importance of structured available mental health support for women leaders in particular.

“Everything is crashing around you and you come home and people ask ‘how was your day?’ There is no answer... And if you don’t have someone who is ready to accept this and just to hug you and to say ‘Ok take some time’... so I think this is why there are so many divorces”

**Oksana Syroyid, Party Leader, Ukraine**

However, 15 interviewees shared positive stories about their strengthened capacity to deal with these challenges due to support from their families and friends. One interviewee acknowledged the challenges her husband had faced due to her political role, but that his support and the fact he prioritised their children and provided stability enabled her to thrive and succeed as a leader. Two interviewees shared the way they sustained their energy in the face of sexist abuse through being able to laugh and spend time with trusted friends.

“A supportive family is absolutely vital. My husband is fantastic... the person who changed my political life was my mother-in-law. So much so we moved into the house next door to my in-laws, and she was there as somebody who actually helped provide stability.”

Support and involvement from close family and friends is commonly noted for both male and female politicians; therefore, including family in training and providing support networks and mentoring for families might be an effective way of promoting women in politics (Cowper Coles, 2020). In addition, there have been numerous calls for political parties

to better accommodate women candidates’ and politicians’ caring responsibilities throughout their careers, and these should be prioritised to support women’s political leadership (Childs, 2016).

“The first time I cried at a meeting, they had no idea what to do... It was a big moment for me where I was like ‘it’s ok to be human here in this space’... for them to understand that their stories impact me and the emotional responses I have makes me far more likely to act.”

One final approach referred to the need to counteract the ‘norms’ around what is expected of political leaders. Challenging gendered norms could alter the perceptions related to responsibilities that women leaders currently have to juggle. One interviewee gave an example of challenging these norms, referring to her experience of allowing herself to be human and displaying her emotions; she considered this to be part of her skillset that enabled her to be an effective political leader. Defying typical and stereotypical ideas of what leadership should look like is vital in pushing back against these norms and may contribute to wider structural shifts that support women’s leadership.

## Conclusion

Women face specific challenges in preparing for and succeeding in candidate selection processes and elections. However, there are a myriad of strategies that can support them, particularly training that builds up campaigning skills and networks which provide guidance and mentorship. The importance of a close relationship with local political parties also cannot be overstated. However, political parties need to adapt to address the barriers that women candidates in particular experience. Women also acknowledged their creativity in approaches to raising their profile, benefiting from strategic use of social media, engagement and experience of community members and grassroots fundraising that enabled them to succeed. Ongoing connections through networks were considered fundamental to supporting women cope with, and adapt to, the realities of political leadership. Alongside strong teams, networks can help women to maintain focus on their political goals, have strategic plans to achieve these, and to connect leaders with civil society and expertise that would pave the way for women leaders to thrive.

In light of these findings, there is a need for more effective support from political parties and political institutions for women in political leadership roles. There are a number of recommendations about programmes and policies that may improve women's experience of political leadership:

- **Formalise and create adaptive and flexible selection procedures:**

Political parties play a fundamental role in supporting women's selection and election, but they need to ensure that selection procedures reduce discrimination faced by candidates, particularly those with multiple responsibilities. In addition, targeted funding is essential to give women candidates independence and reduce the discrepancies they face in access to resources.

- **Long-term and embedded campaign training:**

Campaign training should be long-term and, alongside building up specific political skills, it should facilitate connections with local party members, civil society actors and existing political networks that women can work with prior to and during elections, and once they reach political office.

- **Sustained political mentorship and networks:**

These are fundamental both for political leaders and for their families, to learn from others' experiences and strategies for coping with the realities of political leadership. The creation of women-targeted networks within parliamentary structures or political parties would also be an important intervention that would benefit women leaders to thrive in political life.

However, improved accommodation of caring and additional responsibilities must also be a priority for political parties and political institutions, who should also consider providing practical resources, such as mental health support to address inequalities. In addition, there is also a need for wider support and targeted programmes to address structural inequalities that affect women's experience of political leadership. The need for wider systemic change is essential, particularly in addressing violence against women in politics and addressing gendered norms that influence women's responsibilities and limit their ability to participate in political life. Broader strategies to promote more equal societies must be prioritised and funded.

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