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Violence Against Women in Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Western Balkans
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Violence Against Women in Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

When the number of politically active women rose, so did the frequency and scope of violent responses to their presence on the political scene. Everywhere in the world, women generally pay a higher price than men for their political participation, which ranges from higher expectations to personalised and sexualised forms of questioning and criticism. As previous research undertaken by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) has shown, this experience is universal but the forms and the dynamics of violence against women in politics are localised. So far there has been no examination of violent responses to political participation of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or of gender-based pressures faced by women politicians in the country. For this reason, we have conducted research on violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the findings are presented in this report.

In addition to the rather negative individual consequences suffered by every woman subjected to violence, the general consequences of violence against women in politics are much larger in scale. This kind of violence reinforces traditional stereotypes and gendered female roles: women are excluded and discouraged from engaging in politics, which is a worrying obstacle faced by women wanting to participate in politics on an equal footing. It therefore represents a serious threat to inclusive and sustainable democracy.

Violence against women in politics takes many forms, from misogynistic and sexist verbal attacks, to petty forms of mostly online harassment and sexual harassment. This study finds that 60.2 per cent of the 83 participants have experienced some form of violence over the course of their engagement in politics, with

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psychological violence being the prevalent form of violence against women in politics. As many as 96.4 per cent of the respondents think that violence against women in politics most commonly takes the form of verbal and emotional abuse. The internet is an important channel for psychological violence against women in politics, and female politicians are frequently exposed to online violence, most commonly in the form of misogynistic and sexualised threats.

96.4%

respondents think that violence against women in politics most commonly takes the form of verbal and emotional abuse.

Political parties, parliaments, assemblies and councils in Bosnia and Herzegovina play a key role in creating preconditions for an increase in the number of women in politics, which includes making sure that women feel safe in these institutions. It is therefore crucial for these institutions to adopt and enforce codes of conduct to address the problem of unwelcome sexualised remarks, sexual harassment, and psychological and all other forms of violence against women, and to provide appropriate mechanisms to protect women from all forms of violence in politics.

Violence against women in politics must not be understood solely in terms of physical injuries, especially because it is commonly manifested in “non-violent” actions which rely on narratives reaffirming conservative ideas about a woman’s place in society. Judicial and law-enforcement authorities should therefore train their employees to enable them to recognise violence against women in politics, act in cases where violence is reported, and take appropriate measures within their scope of competence even if there has been no bodily harm. It is also important that institutional gender equality mechanisms advocate for consistent implementation of the Istanbul Convention, and for the criminalisation of the forms of violence listed in the Istanbul Convention. The media should regularly assess if women and women’s policies are adequately represented in their reporting, and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to gender-based violence in their editorial policies.

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Introduction

Women around the world are increasingly getting involved in politics; but in parallel with this, they are also facing threats and intimidation aimed at discouraging them from equal participation in politics.

As part of a three-year programme (2018–2021), the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) strives to make a contribution towards the establishment of more inclusive democratic institutions by improving the opportunities for women to take an active part in political and public life. Based on years of work in this field, WFD and many other relevant institutions have identified violence as one of the obstacles hindering women's active engagement in politics. Women around the world are increasingly getting involved in politics; but in parallel with this, they are also facing threats and intimidation aimed at discouraging them from equal participation in politics. This experience is universal, but the forms and the dynamics of violence against women in politics are localised.¹ WFD Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has therefore conducted this research to gain a better understanding of the

manifestation of this phenomenon in BiH, as well as the structural factors which underpin it.

This is the first research on violence related to the political participation of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as on gender-based pressures faced by female politicians in the country. In 2013, BiH ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention)², thereby taking on the obligation to implement legislative and other measures to provide a legal, institutional, and organisational framework for the prevention of all forms of violence against women, the protection of the victims and the prosecution of the perpetrators. However, the bulk of the effort to protect all women in BiH from all forms of violence has so far mostly been focused on the protection of women who have experienced domestic violence, that is, on the

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¹ O'Connell, Shannon and Ramshaw, Graeme (2018). *Violence Against Women in Politics: Global Perspectives of a Global Issue*.

² *Official Gazette*. BiH 15/13.

This study maps the forms of violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the impact it has on the participation of women in public and political life.

prevention, prosecution, and elimination of domestic violence. At the same time, violence directed against women in the wider community by strangers as well as persons known to them is often overlooked, whilst domestic violence is conceptually and phenomenologically equated with violence against women outside of the family sphere. This highlights the significance of this study intended to inform the public at large, institutional gender equality mechanisms, political parties, and other relevant decision-makers in BiH, and thereby facilitate the design of more efficient and comprehensive responses to violence against women which takes place in private as well as the public sphere.

This study maps the forms of violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the impact it has on the participation of women in public and political life. It also identifies the sources of violence against women in politics, the main actors, institutional mechanisms, factors which enable violence against women in politics, as well as the measures and activities which have to be undertaken in order to address this problem adequately.

The goal of the study is to provide data as the basis for further and more detailed research on the problem of violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and for the drafting of comprehensive policies, programmes, and activities aimed at preventing and suppressing this form of violence against women. Its main objective is to provide evidence to inform decision-making and advocacy on all administrative levels, which will ultimately facilitate the creation of equal opportunities for women and men to engage in politics, the reduction in the rates of violence against women in BiH, the improvement of support, and the creation of a safer environment for women. This facet is crucial for meeting the targets set in the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, especially Goal 5, which aims to establish gender equality and empower girls and women.

Methodology and Research Questions

This study aims to provide answers to the following questions:

- How prevalent is violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which forms of violence are encountered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, when, how and why does it happen?

To collect
primary data
semi-structured
interviews were
conducted with 83
female politicians
from 37 towns and
cities in BiH.

- What are the sources of violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who are the main actors, which factors exacerbate the problem?
- To what extent does the national legal and strategic framework protect women from violence in politics? What is, or should be, the role of the political parties, legislative bodies, the media, and law enforcement in addressing this issue?
- How does violence impact women in politics, or their decision to go into politics?
- What are the recommendations to prevent and stop violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

In order to obtain responses to these questions, a methodology was developed which combined several research methods and toolboxes, including: a review of previous research, a questionnaire and field research. To collect primary data semi-structured interviews were conducted with 83 female politicians

from 37 towns and cities in BiH, ranging in age from 18 to over 55, who identify as Bosnians-Herzegovinians (21.7 per cent), Bosniaks (34.9 per cent), Croats (18.1 per cent), Jews (1.2 per cent), Serbs (19.35 per cent), Roma (1.2 per cent), and other (3.6 per cent).

The questionnaire was anonymous and comprised approximately 52 questions (the actual number depended on the respondents' answers) divided into four sets: (1) demographic questions, (2) questions pertaining to political participation, (3) questions about attitudes towards violence against women in politics, and (4) questions related to personal experience with violence against women in politics.

In order to get a more complete picture of the scope and type of violence, 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with women politicians who have experienced gender-based violence. The respondents who indicated in the questionnaire that they agreed to be contacted for more information were selected for the interviews.

For a detailed description of the research methodology see Appendix II of this report.

1. The conceptual framework of violence against women in politics



Women in political life face all manner of obstacles, such as gender-based discrimination, patriarchal patterns of behaviour, and stifling traditional gender roles. But this study focuses only on violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina and gender-based violence.

The basic reference point of this research is the definition of violence against women in politics contained in the report by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences from August 2018³ which acknowledges that both men and women can experience violence in politics, but adds:

3 Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences (2018). *Violence against Women in Politics, Expert Group Report*, UN General Assembly, A/73/301, III B 11-12.

Such acts of violence against women...target them because of their gender and take gender-based forms, such as sexist threats or sexual harassment and violence. Their aim is to discourage women from being politically active and exercising their human rights and to influence, restrict, or prevent the political participation of individual women and women as a group. Such violence... consists of any act of gender-based violence, or

threat of such acts, [coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty]⁴ that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately.

4 The Report of the UN Special Rapporteur makes no mention of “threats of such acts [coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty]”, although it is based on the definition of violence against women from the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women from 1993. This definition is based on both documents.

The National Democratic Institute defines violence against women in politics as encompassing all forms of aggression, coercion, and intimidation against women as political actors simply because they are women⁵, and highlights three key characteristics of this form of violence in politics:

- 1) It targets women because of their gender.
- 2) Its very form can be gendered, as exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence.
- 3) Its impact is to discourage women in particular from being or becoming politically active...as voters, civic leaders, political party members, candidates, elected representatives or appointed officials.⁶

5 O’Connell et al (2018), p. 7.

6 National Democratic Institute (2017), p. 12.

The results of recent research among female MPs reveal the worrying fact that in 39 countries, over 44 per cent of interviewed MPs have experienced violence.

Based on experiences of women in politics, violence has divided into four categories: (1) psychological, (2) physical, (3) sexual, and (4) economic violence against women in politics⁷, with psychological violence being the most common form of violence against women in politics.

The results of recent research among female MPs reveal the worrying fact that in 39 countries, over 44 per cent of interviewed MPs have experienced violence in the form of death threats, rape threats, threats of physical violence or abduction, whilst one fifth of the respondents have experienced sexual violence⁸.

At the same time, experiences that both men and women have that are often dismissed as “the cost of doing politics” can qualify as forms of violence against women in politics⁹. For example, the exchange of material goods for positions of power within parties or elected bodies is often commonly accepted even though it is

corrupt behaviour. But for women, unlike men, the predominant demands are for sex or sexual favours instead of money, so this extortion¹⁰ can fall into the category of violence against women. This type of extortion further pollutes a system’s democratic culture: women learn that only by providing such “favours” can they move up the political ladder, and citizens’ perceptions of women in politics are coloured by the belief that any woman who advances must have performed such favours¹¹.

Therefore, this research examines the physical, psychological, sexual and economic forms of violence against women in politics, including violent behaviour such as stalking, harassment, and intimidation. There has been some research on these forms of violence occurring in areas such as elections and electoral processes, citizen participation, as well as within political parties and legislative and executive institutions.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁸ O’Connell et al. (2018), Filion (2016).

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ A phenomenon known as sextortion. Cf.: Transparency International (2016) Sextortion: Undermining Gender Equality, available at: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/sextortion_undermining_gender_equality

¹¹ National Democratic Institute (2017), p. 13.

2. Bosnian-Herzegovinian context



2.1. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

47.2%

per cent of women
over 15 years of
age experienced
some form of
violence.

Violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina is generally a widespread problem. According to a 2013 study¹² conducted by the Agency for Gender Equality BiH, 47.2 of women over 15 years of age experienced some form of violence, whilst 11.9 per cent of women had experienced violence in the 12 months prior to the research. The same study showed that psychological violence is the most prevalent form, with the total prevalence rate of 41.9 per cent at some point in life and 10.8 per cent in the 12 months prior to the research, and it is followed by physical violence with the prevalence rate of 24.3 per cent at some point in life and 2.4 per cent in the preceding 12 months. Six per cent of women experienced sexual violence. Of the women who reported having

¹² The research was conducted on a representative sample of 3,300 women older than 18 in the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska. Cf: Babović et al. (2013).

experienced violence, 46.8 per cent experienced multiple forms, the most common combination being psychological and physical violence.

Other findings from this study indicate that violence is most commonly perpetrated by partners or former partners (71.5 per cent of cases), and that young women are subjected to violence more than elderly women, with the prevalence rate in the 18–24 cohort being 56.38 per cent, and in the 65-and-over cohort 44.2 per cent. Also exposed to violence are women of ill health and women with disabilities, with the prevalence rates the same as in the subset of women without medical conditions or disability. Only 5.5 per cent of women who have experienced violence sought help at an institution, while 62.5 per cent of women thought they did not need help, most commonly because they did not see themselves as victims of violence or were unable to recognise certain forms of violence, such as sexual or economic violence in

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a relationship. Violence incidence data from this study indicates that these are not isolated cases but recurring practices, and that violence commonly remains unreported because of the dominant traditional patriarchal justifications for violence.

The above-mentioned research is the most relevant reference on the forms and prevalence of violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina; but it does not shed light on almost 30 per cent of cases of gender-based violence against women outside of family or a relationship. Thus the forms and prevalence of violence against women in public and political life in Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the time of publication, were completely unresearched. The consequences of this are reflected in the dearth of relevant information on this phenomenon, and the limited strategic operation of institutional mechanisms and the inadequate legal protection of women in politics.

2.2. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE LEGAL AND STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN FROM VIOLENCE

In 2013, Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention¹³ which entered into force in 2014. In doing so, BiH took on the obligation to undertake legislative and other measures to provide the legal, institutional, and organisational frameworks for the prevention of violence against women, the protection of survivors of violence and the prosecution of perpetrators of violence. Although the primary goal of the convention is the protection of women from all forms of violence as well as preventing, prosecuting and eliminating violence against women and domestic violence,¹⁴ the bulk of the effort to protect all women in BiH from all forms of violence has mostly been focused on the protection of women who experienced

The bulk of the effort to protect all women in BiH from all forms of violence has mostly been focused on the protection of women who experienced domestic violence.

¹³ Official Gazette BiH 15/13.

¹⁴ Istanbul Convention, Article 1.

domestic violence, whilst the less frequent forms of violence, that is, violence inflicted on women in broader society by strangers or persons known to them, are almost completely overlooked. Thus almost all legislative and strategic documents relevant for this field pay lip service to gender-based violence, but the focus is lost at the first mention of domestic violence which is conceptually and phenomenologically equated with the general phenomenon of violence against women outside of the family sphere.

Thus the 2018–2022 gender action plan (GAP) of Bosnia and Herzegovina gives an overview of the present situation as regards gender-based violence and states that BiH has ratified the Istanbul Convention and adopted the Framework strategy for the implementation of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence 2015–2018 in accordance with the obligations it took by ratifying the convention, and that the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska have adopted and are enforcing strategies for the prevention and combating of domestic violence¹⁵. Strategic engagement with

15 Gender action plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018–2022, p. 11.

violence against women is lost between these two administrative levels, seeing that the above-mentioned entity strategies do not address violence against women outside of the family sphere. Victim protection as well as coordinated work by protection-providing institutions is focused exclusively on domestic violence survivors, and is regulated by the new Protection from Domestic Violence Act of the Federation of BiH¹⁶, or the new Protection from Domestic Violence Act of the Republika Srpska¹⁷, both of which are to a considerable degree harmonised with the Istanbul Convention within their scope.

The framework strategy for the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 2015–2018 states that there is a range of specialised services of support to victims of violence provided in BiH. These types of services are established “for the purpose of providing assistance and support to victims of domestic violence through the implementation of laws on protection from domestic violence” and are available to survivors

16 *Official Gazette* of the Federation of BiH 20/13.

17 *Official Gazette* of the Republika Srpska 102/12 and 108/13.

of this particular type of violence¹⁸. As an argument in favour of so limited an approach to specialised support services, a study of the prevalence and characteristics of violence against women in BiH¹⁹ is mentioned, whose findings indicate that intimate partner violence or domestic violence is the most common form of violence against women (71.5 per cent of cases), therefore “protection measures for victims of domestic violence, as they are formally defined, correspond to current trends as regards the prevalence of certain types of violence against women”. Therefore, specialised support services, too, are not completely available to women who have experienced violence perpetrated by persons who are not their present or former intimate partners, or family members, as defined under family acts of the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska.

Although the last GAP states that the implementation of previous GAPs and entity strategies has “laid the groundwork for the

sustainability of a multidisciplinary approach to protection from and prevention of gender-based *violence*”²⁰, in reality these efforts were geared towards domestic violence exclusively; the obligation has been introduced to form cantonal coordination bodies and municipal multisector teams, as well as to sign the protocol on cooperation in cases of domestic violence on the municipal and cantonal level in the Federation of BiH; in the Republika Srpska, the general domestic violence protocol; in the cantons of the Federation of BiH cantonal programmes are being adopted; in both entities, professionals are being trained on how to proceed in cases of domestic violence, work with perpetrators has been intensified; in the Federation of BiH an electronic database of reported cases of domestic violence has been established.

Criminal codes in BiH (Criminal Code of the Federation of BiH, Criminal Code of the Republika Srpska, Criminal Code of the Brčko District BiH) have still not been fully harmonised with the convention as regards special legal provisions criminalising stalking (article 34 of the Convention), forced marriage (article 37

18 Framework Strategy for the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence 2015–2018, p. 16.

19 Babović et al. (2013).

20 Gender action plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018–2022, p. 12.

of the Convention), and genital mutilation of women (article 38 of the Convention). With the recent adoption of the new Criminal Code, the Republika Srpska has made an effort to harmonise with the convention by criminalising genital mutilation of women, stalking, and sexual harassment²¹, none of which is treated as a felony in the Criminal Code of the Federation of BiH. Studies have shown that line services commonly recognise only the physical form of violence, where there are visible bodily injuries, whilst other forms of violence against women are in most cases dismissed²². Monitoring of trials for gender-based violence in the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska has shown that criminal proceedings in cases of domestic violence are usually initiated in a timely manner, whilst proceedings in cases of crimes against sexual integrity are delayed without a valid reason for as long as several years. More specifically, indictment confirmation is usually late even if the investigation was completed shortly after the felony was reported²³.

21 Criminal Code of the Republika Srpska (*Official Gazette* of the Republika Srpska, 64/17), Arts. 133, 144 and 170.

22 Cf: Galić and Petrić (2015), Babović (2017).

23 Petrić and Radončić (2014).

All of the above results in the systemic dismissal of the experience of women who suffer violence outside of the legally defined family sphere, especially within the rigidly hierarchical structures of public and political life in BiH dominated by the political elites. There is a lack of effective mechanisms of protection and support for women who suffer violence regardless of the setting. In addition to the fact that women remain unprotected as they attempt to enjoy their basic human rights and freedoms, especially their civil and political rights, the great danger of overlooking the widespread problem of violence against women in public and political life lies in the fact that such violence aims to preserve traditional gender roles and stereotypes, as well as to retain the structural and gender-based inequality in society²⁴. Hence the need to question violent gender-based pressures and responses to participation of women in public and political life in BiH.

24 UN General Assembly (2018), p. 5/21.

Patriarchal social system represents the greatest and still unsurmountable obstacle on the path to equal participation of women and men in political processes.

2.3. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Although political participation of women is increasingly recognised as an important feature of a democratic society in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad, female politicians still face a range of hurdles in their political activities. These hurdles are most commonly based on a patriarchal system in which men are given absolute preference, which limits the human rights of women and perpetuates the domination of men in public and private life. In feminist theory, the concept of patriarchy is described as relations of power between men and women; more broadly, patriarchy stands for the manifestation and

institutionalisation of male dominance over women in all social spheres, especially those where the most important social, political, and economic decisions are made. Therefore the patriarchal social system represents the greatest and still unsurmountable obstacle on the path to equal participation of women and men in political processes.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this has been observable on several levels since the 1990s. The share of women in legislative bodies in 1995 was only 2.9 per cent, the lowest since 1946²⁵. Many years had to pass for a step forward to be made in terms of participation of women in political life in BiH, and the obstacles were reflected in the prioritising of other identities such as ethnicity

25 Aganović, Miftari, Veličković (2015).

and national affiliation as a result of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the adoption of the first gender quotas in 1998 that required at least one third of the lists of candidates contesting the elections to be populated by women, in 2013 the Election Law BiH was partially harmonised with the Gender Equality Act when the quota was raised to 40 per cent. In the 2014 general elections, this change saw 40.9 per cent of female candidates running for the House of Representatives, 43.6 per cent for the Parliament of the Federation of BiH, and 41.4 per cent for the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska²⁶. More women were elected in 2014 than had been the case in previous elections: 19.9 per cent at

26 Aganović *et. al.* (2015).

23.55%

per cent of women
were elected in
state and entity
legislative bodies
, which points
to a small and
still insufficient
increase in the
representation
of women in
legislative bodies
in BiH, in the 2018
general election.

all levels of government compared to 17.3 per cent in 2010 and 17.2 per cent in 2006. In the 2018 general election, 23.55 per cent of women were elected in state and entity legislative bodies²⁷, which points to a small and still insufficient increase in the representation of women in legislative bodies in BiH. Bosnia and Herzegovina currently sits at 92nd place on the Inter-Parliamentary Union world list of women in national parliaments, behind North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro²⁸.

Participation of women in the executive branch remains a challenge because there are still no mechanisms to ensure equal participation of women and men in accordance with the Gender Equality Act. Women face obstacles precluding their greater participation in their own political parties, which is commonly reflected in the fact that women are still invisible in party documents, including during election campaigns, as well as in the fact that they are rarely list leaders and rarely run for the office

of mayor. Party documents and procedures are usually gender-insensitive²⁹, and strategic drives to include more women in the making of important decisions remains confined to statutory support of the political parties for gender equality. Political parties are doing very little to further the inclusion of women in decision-making, progressive female politicians are pushed off out the political scene without any regard for their immeasurable contribution to the democratisation of BiH society, while even more potential women politicians never get the opportunity to make any kind of contribution, being excluded from important processes within their own parties and in the wider community. These obstacles are frequently based on subtle discriminatory, discouraging practices, and damaging stereotypes of women who show interest for participation in political processes, and they often take on violent forms to discourage women from active engagement in politics.

27 House of Representatives Parliamentary Assembly of BiH 21.42 per cent, National Assembly of the Republika Srpska 21.68 per cent, and Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 27.55 per cent (data from May 2019).

28 Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in National Parliaments – World Classification, available at: <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/ClaSSif.htm>.

29 Cf. Aladžuz (2014).

3. Attitudes towards violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Research conducted in this study³⁰ found that 60.2 per cent of the 83 respondents have experienced some form of violence during their engagement in politics, and that 45.8 per cent of women politicians have experienced violence just because they are women. The respondents mostly (69.9 per cent) agreed with the statement that violence against women in politics is not recognised as a form of gender-based violence, that is violence directed against women for being women, and a violation of human rights, and that violence against women in politics is perceived as normal in politics (66.3 per cent). To a lesser extent (53 per cent) they believed that violence against women in politics is widespread.

45.8%

of women
politicians have
experienced
violence just
because they are
women.

Violence against women is perceived as normal in politics.

	Number	Percentage
Disagree completely	9	10.84%
Mostly disagree	12	14.46%
Neither agree nor disagree	7	8.43%
Mostly agree	26	31.33%
Agree completely	29	34.94%

30 Semi-structured interviews on violence against women in politics were used in this study to examine the attitudes of politically active women on violence against women in politics in BiH. The respondents were asked to indicate to which extent they agreed with a selection of statements taking into consideration that violence against women affects women because they are women, and has gender-based forms such as sexist threats or sexual harassment and violence. These attitudes were then further researched qualitatively.

Violence against women in politics is widespread.



Female politicians
see violence as
part of politics, like
it or not.

Qualitative research found that female politicians see violence as part of politics – the cost of doing it – and that they think women have to accept it as normal, like it or not.

Women who engage in politics and have an attitude and a vision must accept that people will try to smear and destroy them, and that this is part and parcel of doing politics.

Respondent, Serb, 55+

Violence is considered normal. You have to put up, like. Why do I have to put up with violence and, say, make sure I dress modestly?

Respondent, Bosniak, 25-34

Respondents were divided on the role of the media in encouraging and condemning violence against women in politics.

They think that the media condemn and encourage violence against women in politics in equal measure. Qualitative research found that they perceive irresponsible reporting on the work of women politicians and frequent objectification of women in the process of reporting as encouraging violence.

After a discussion about this or that bill, a journalist, a woman, stops in front of the White Hall in the parliament building, and asks you about your husband's career, or why you are dressed the way you are, so they run a picture of you with comments on how my handbag goes with my boots, but she will ask my male colleague about the things I have just talked about in session.

Respondent, Croat, 35-44

Of course, gender-insensitive and irresponsible reporting is a substantial problem faced by those who endeavour to raise awareness of the importance of political participation of women, and such practices are considered discriminatory, but not necessarily violent. This study's qualitative research indicates that the problem lies with the media outlets with close ties to the political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina that target political opponents in an extremely unfair and ultimately violent way.

I was all but a whore in those articles they ran on the websites connected with them. I was supposed to have close ties to Catholic fascists, to Muslim fascists, I was the worst, a pawn of other parties, an impostor. There was not a single article in which I was mentioned in a positive context. You cannot live that down. I just let the storm pass. Nobody from my party spoke up about these comments, pictures, articles.

Respondent, Bosniak, 45-54

74.7%

reported that
social network
users are most
commonly the
perpetrators of
violence against
women in politics.

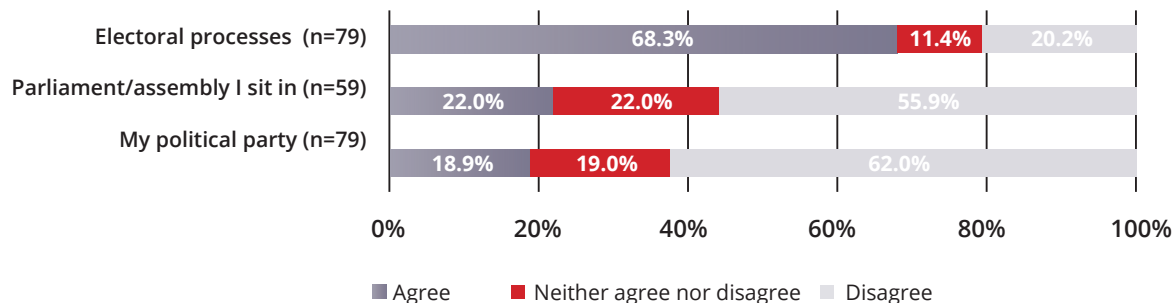
The respondents
mostly agree that
violence against
women is often
committed during
the election
process.

They made these
photomontages of me, made
it look like I was somebody's
mistress. They ran statements
to the effect that I was in
all kinds of relations with
the mayor. We could have
sued for libel, and that is
what would have probably
happened had someone from
Sarajevo been smeared so
brutally. Every three months
somebody was attacking me.
My family had a horrible time.

Respondent, Croat, 45-54

Sixty-two per cent of the respondents (n=79) disagree with the statement that violence is often perpetrated against women within their political party, while 55.9 per cent (n=59) do not think that violence occurs in the parliaments in which they serve as MPs. 18.9 per cent agree with the statement that violence is often perpetrated against women within their political party and 22 per cent agree that violence occurs in the parliaments in which they serve as MPs (n=59,) while a significant share were unable to say whether or not violence was often perpetrated against women in their political parties (n=79, 19per cent), or whether or not it was frequently perpetrated in the parliaments in which they served as MPs (n=59, 22 per cent). The respondents mostly agree that violence against women is often committed during the election process (68,35 per cent; n=79).








Where does violence most frequently occur?



Of the total number of respondents, 74.7 per cent reported that social network users were the most common perpetrators of violence against women in politics, 66.3 per cent said that violence

was most often perpetrated by members of opposing parties of coalitions, 47 per cent reported that perpetrators most frequently came from the ranks of the victims' own parties, 16.9 per cent said that it was the media, the same percentage think it was the voters, and they mostly disagreed that the usual perpetrators were wider or closer family members (2.4 per cent) or representatives of civil society organisations (1.2 per cent).³¹

Most common perpetrators of violence against women in politics (multiple answers possible):

		Number	Percentage
Members of same party or coalition		39	46.99%
Members of opposing party or coalition		55	66.27%
Voters		14	16.87%
Social media users		62	74.7%
The media		14	16.87%
Representatives of CSOs		1	1.2%
Family members		2	2.41%

³¹ Respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.

When it comes to the options available to solve the problem of violence against women in politics, respondents mostly said that there is not a single public institution where women in politics can petition to seek protection and help with the experience of violence (61.4 per cent). It is interesting to note that attitudes are different when it comes to civil society organisations women can go to for protection and help with the experience of violence. Thus 39.7 per cent of the respondents did not think that a single organisation of that kind exists, 36.1 per cent disagreed with that statement, whilst a significant share (24.1 per cent) neither agreed nor disagreed, which indicates that they know of such civil society organisation, but they are not sure about how much protection and assistance these organisations are capable of rendering to women politicians who have suffered violence.

4. Incidence and forms of violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina



4.1. PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

Psychological violence against women in politics comprises hostile behaviour and abuse which serves to cause fear or emotional damage; it includes threats of physical violence, extortion, and actions aimed to damage women's social standing³². Some of the examples of psychological violence against women in politics are death or rape threats, character assassination³³, ostracism, stalking, illegitimate deprivation of the floor in meetings and sessions by switching the microphone off or taking it away, constant interruptions with sexist comments or heckling, and it can also occur in the family sphere whereby women are

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Bardall (2018b).

threatened with violence or divorce if they do not vote for a particular political party or candidate, or if they do not abstain altogether from any kind of political activity³⁴.

As many as 96.4 per cent of the respondents in this research think that violence against women in politics most often takes the form of verbal and emotional abuse, such as insults, slurs, humiliation, mocking, and criticising outward appearance, while 53 per cent think intimidation is one of the most frequently occurring forms of violence against women in politics, and 10.8 per cent think it is threats of physical and sexual violence³⁵. Respondents who have experienced gender-based violence in politics also confirm that in most cases it took the form of verbal and emotional abuse and intimidation.

First they try to buy you, then they try to
kill you, then they respect you. I am in the

³⁴ National Democratic Institute (2017), O'Connell et al (2018).

³⁵ Respondents were allowed to choose multiple answers.

third stage right now: they respect me.
In 2001 my life was in danger, I could not
live at home for a month, and the SWAT
team taught me how to check my car
for explosives. To this day, without even
thinking, I first open the boot, then the
passenger's door, then the driver's.

Respondent, Bosniak, 45-54

Women politicians experience psychological violence perpetrated by strangers and abusers known to them, such as party colleagues and leaders. Such violence is most often connected with publicly expressed political viewpoints which are at odds with the party line. For instance, some respondents report having received all kinds of threats aimed to intimidate them into voting the way their party wants them to:

I have experienced verbal violence from a party colleague...he threatened me, like: "You will see". At one point he threatened me on the phone to get me to vote the way he wanted me to, he did not want me to vote the way I wanted and he forbade me to lobby others. I asked him if he was threatening me, and again he said: "You will see". That is my party colleague. I do not think he would treat a man that way.

Respondent, Bosniak, 45-54

Important facets of psychological violence are aggressive, misogynistic, and belittling comments about women's bodies and outward appearance, their age and personal integrity. This is aimed to depreciate female politicians and undermine their sense of legitimacy and competence. Such comments often come from the very top of the party:

[Party leader] told me I was tormenting him, in the sense that he did not know what to do with me, I was useless, I thought I was the prettiest, most attractive, smartest. It is about your outward appearance and your personality.

Respondent, Croat, 35-44

Colleagues from other political parties called me "luv", they would never address me by my name. Later they switched to "colleague". It took them a while to start using my name. They would eyeball the length of my skirt, make comments about the way I dressed, and other such macho remarks. The most

unpleasant incident happened the day after the elections, a group of them were sitting with a few politicians in the garden in front of a café, and they shouted, “whore” as I walked past, and I was young enough to be their daughter. Everyone was stiff, the image froze, like in a film. That happened in the city, on the promenade. There have been many such situations. Quite a lot of heckling, untoward comments, scrutinising of my private life.

Respondent, Bosniak, 25-34

Violence against women in politics, as well as other forms of violence against women, must be decoupled from physical injuries, especially since it is often manifested in “non-violent” actions which rely on narratives reaffirming conservative ideas about a woman’s “place” in society³⁶. Thus in order to belittle the competence and ability of women in politics, abusers may often focus on women’s bodies or the traditional gender roles of wives and mothers. Still, seeing that the motive is the defining element of violent action, using gender stereotypes to attack women can qualify as violence against women in politics, considering that the message is communicated in a way which indicates that women do not belong in politics³⁷.

³⁶ National Democratic Institute (2017), str. 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

4.1.1. ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

The internet is one of the important channels for committing psychological violence against women in politics. Women politicians are quite often exposed to online violence, most commonly expressed through misogynistic and sexualised threats. Research worldwide has shown that online harassment and abuse affect women to a considerably greater extent³⁸, which represents a challenge to the active participation of women in politics, brings into question the integrity of online spaces, undermines democratic culture and practices, and creates preconditions for escalations of violence in other offline spaces. This can discourage women from active involvement in politics or online political debates because the cost and the risk of participation outweigh the benefits.³⁹

38 Lenhart et al. (2016), Duggan (2014), National Democratic Institute (2017), UN Women (2018).

39 National Democratic Institute (2017), p. 14, 20.

Social networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, are online tools that have taken hold in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last 10 years. These networks are the simplest, fastest, most efficient way for politicians to communicate with their voters and the public at large, and, amongst other things, they facilitate honest political debate and remove the obstacle of physical distance which often hinders the inclusion of the public at large in discussions on important social and political issues. Still, they are often a double-edged sword, because physical distance and anonymity often encourage potential abusers.

A 2018 study on online gender-based violence⁴⁰ found that online gender-based violence is most frequently engaged in as a reaction to statements on human rights (25.9 per cent) or politics (24.9 per cent), most commonly in the form of violent comments (27.9 per

40 Salihović *et al.* (2018).

cent) and stalking/persecution (11.8 per cent). The same research stated that online violence most commonly happens on Facebook, and that the perpetrators of these types of violence are mostly strangers to their victims⁴¹. The widespread online violence is aimed to exclude and muffle the voices of female political activists, and poses another serious challenge for political participation of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Respondents in this study pointed out that a considerable share of violence is perpetrated precisely via Facebook, anonymously, with a view to belittling, objectifying, and discouraging women in politics:

On Facebook it is mostly aggressive attempts at pulling, pestering, compliments, piffle-paffle. These are mostly middle-aged men using fake profiles. The point of this is mental torture,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

so you cannot concentrate on the things that matter, they want to distract you and leech away your energy till you no longer feel well.

Respondent, Bosniak, 45-54

The study's qualitative research found that subtle harassment faced by female politicians often turns into aggressive stalking and attacking the personality of the targeted women, as well as their private and family lives. There are often insinuations being made regarding the sexual morals of female politicians who have achieved a measure of success in their political careers:

Social networks are the rubbish dump of the internet. When I was elected, the comments were mostly to the effect that I had slept with somebody to become an MP, that I was an

illegitimate child, that I had paid a bribe, and so on. These things were sent to me directly, mostly anonymously, from fake Facebook profiles.

Respondent, Croat, 25-34

Some female politicians are commonly accused of being somebody or other's mistresses. Before I graduated, they called me "shepherd girl", I was not educated enough for them.

Respondent, Bosniak, 25-34

Situations like these are quite exhausting for women politicians and there often seems to be no way out of them, considering

that women often see no way to stop the harassment except withdrawing from the conversation or leaving social networks. A significant share of online violence against women in politics takes place in public, in social networks, and internet portals, therefore it has a negative impact not only on the targeted women, but on their families, too:

My vote brought down a budget rebalance, and from that moment on my life turned into a nightmare. My children blocked me on Facebook, they could not take it anymore. A lynch mob was after me. I did not read 10 per cent of that stuff, I wanted to keep my sanity and I told my children not to read. My party at that time had employees who took down the brutal, vulgar comments from all the party

pages. They also contacted me directly on social networks, that was horrible, the things I got to hear: “you whore”, “you criminal”, “what did this person give you”, “what did the other person pay you”. It was an ongoing lynch.

Respondent, Croat, 45-54

I had no one to turn to, I complained to party members and leadership in my town, but they dismissed it. They said not to pay attention to those idiots, they just have too much time on their hands.

Respondent, Bosniak, 25-34

As with all other aspects of violence against women in politics, psychological violence is not taken seriously, and this poses a problem. Except for the multifarious ways to downplay the damage that has already been done, political parties do not have concrete mechanisms in place to protect their female members from online violence, so violence is often trivialised and ignored:

Not a single criminal code in Bosnia and Herzegovina criminalises online gender-based violence against women, only certain acts which involve or indicate violence against women (for instance, there are felonies against sexual integrity, against family and marriage, etc.). It is important to point out that all kinds of technologies, including social networks, can be abused for the purposes of preparing or committing a variety of gender-based felonies. Criminal codes in Bosnia and Herzegovina criminalise,

albeit in a gender-neutral way, threat to personal security, unauthorised surveillance and audio/video recording, blackmail and non-consensual intercourse, whilst the Criminal Code of the Republika Srpska criminalises stalking, sexual harassment, and sexual extortion, which is not the case with the criminal codes of Federation of BiH and Brčko District BiH⁴². Sexual harassment is defined in the Gender Equality Act BiH and the Prohibition of Discrimination Act BiH.

42 Salihović et al. (2018).

4.2. ECONOMIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

Economic violence against women in politics involves violent behaviour intended to control women's access to economic resources, whereby, for instance, women who vote are denied financial and other forms of support by their families if they do not vote for a particular political party or candidate, or if they do not abstain from any kind of political activity whatsoever, whilst female politicians may be denied access to financial and other resources needed for campaigning, professional development, or routine political activities, to which they are legally entitled or which are normally available to their male colleagues⁴³.

A substantial share of the respondents (40.9 per cent) said that denying access to financial or other economic resources normally available to others is one of the most frequently occurring

43 *Ibid.*

forms of violence against women in politics⁴⁴. Qualitative research found that economic violence is used to pressure women to renounce their views or blackmail them to do someone's bidding. Respondents often pointed out that they are perceived as economically weak, dependent and/or un-entrepreneurial, and therefore it is thought that they can be easily bought. Describing incidents of this type, respondents frequently pointed out that they are perceived as "the weaker sex" or "the weakest link". A respondent described being blackmailed as the chair of a local council in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

He was putting pressure on me because he thought I was the weakest link, and they needed a vote in the council. He said to me: "You will switch [to my party], or else no salary, nothing. And that man of yours won't get anything until you switch". This council chair never drew a salary, unlike her predecessors; they never approved my request for professional status. That was an attack on my livelihood. Before that I had worked at an NGO, where I had quit to avoid conflict of interest, and I have been unemployed since. They blackmail you when they know you are unemployed, and they assume unemployed people cave easily for a salary on a par with a municipal mayor's. However, I never so much as thought of caving and when I refused, they removed me from the post of the council chair.

Respondent, Croat, 45-54

44 The respondents were able to choose multiple answers.

The respondents also pointed out that their political engagement has had a negative impact on their careers outside of politics, where women face various pressures and are forced to choose between their professional and political career:

Violence in politics is very subtle, there are no physical altercations...it is mostly psychological and financial violence. Financial in the sense that as soon as you dip a toe in politics, your company starts to lose contracts, you are automatically taken off the projects you have been working on and you vanish from the media, to me that is violence. The media stop calling you. They crush you financially and psychologically. What are you good for after something like that?

Respondent, Bosniak, 45-54

Like other forms of violence, economic violence against women is intended to dissuade them from active political participation or lessen their chances of getting the job done effectively, which ultimately impacts their reputation with the population and voters, and can potentially harm their political career⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ National Democratic Institute (2017), UN Women (2018).

4.3. SEXUAL AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

Sexual violence against women in politics comprises acts against one's sexual integrity, including unwelcome sexual comments, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, rape, threats of sexual violence, pressuring women to provide sexual favours in exchange for advancement through party ranks, campaigning funds or support for an activity, sexual harassment at the polling station, etc⁴⁶. There is also the increasing phenomenon of sexually explicit or graphic representation of women online, which reduces women to their sex and denies them basic human dignity⁴⁷.

The respondents interviewed for this study had not experienced extreme or physical forms of sexual violence. However, they pointed out that unwelcome sexual comments are an everyday occurrence even in parliament, and that they are mostly intended to silence women and discourage them from taking the floor in sessions.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Unwelcome sexual comments often serve as a warning to other women politicians about what they can expect if they act in the same or similar way:

Every time I went down the steps in the council hall to take the floor, and I did that often, they would make comments along the lines of “you think you are clever, don't you?” Can you imagine, you walk past, and they make comments about your bum, laugh at you, “have you put on some weight, luv”, “have you lost any”, “are those trousers tight, or perhaps not”, “you will lose weight if you keep going up and down those steps”, and similar heckles. Can you imagine the effort it takes to focus and carry on after that? No male colleague of mine was heckled so. You cannot be a professional, nobody respects you.

Respondent, Croat, 45-54

We [women] are considered [the] weaker sex and to them [men] this is a commonplace, which is why they have the courage to attack. There were numerous verbal attacks on me during the campaign. When I would come to the council meeting I would hear comments to the effect that I must have had sex the previous night, which explains my good mood.

Respondent, Bosniak, 25-34

Physical violence against women in politics comprises physical injuries inflicted directly on women or their family members, and it includes battery, domestic abuse, abduction, murder, and other forms of violence⁴⁸. None of the respondents from this study reported experiencing that.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

4.4. MOTIVES FOR VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

The respondents stated that violence was most often preceded by an appearance in the media, a public expression of opinion, especially dissenting opinion expressed in a critical or provocative manner, personal disagreement with the abuser, animosity based on membership in a different political party or ethnic group, jealousy of political accomplishment or rapport with the voters, a comment on the social media, or there would simply be no reason at all. The respondents believed they are often perceived as weak and powerless, and that bullies engage in violence because they feel threatened, so they resort to violent behaviour to eliminate the threat, or because “their ego is hurt”. Attacking political viewpoints of women does not necessarily amount to gender-based violence, as long as it can be seen as constructive criticism or political exchange of opinion protected by free speech. However, attacks on women are often intensified through persistent and repetitive patterns of behaviour, even though they still remain under the radar or are dismissed as inconsequential. A single sexist insult can be taken as a lapse in manners; but if women in politics are constantly faced with an avalanche of harassment and abuse, this becomes violence, especially if it results in the internalisation of the position that violence is part of the female experience in politics, because this undermines the sense of safety of women attempting to exercise their political rights⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ National Democratic Institute (2017), p. 14.

5. The consequences of violence against women in politics



Women active in politics who have experienced gender-based violence are faced with multiple obstacles in their quest for justice. These obstacles extend beyond the situation they are in as women politicians, and include secondary victimisation after a report. In addition, women often face resistance by law enforcement officers in charge of processing the perpetrators, as well as inadequate legal protection or access to integrated protection services, which is also characteristic of the obstacles faced by victims of other forms of gender-based violence against women.⁵⁰ In a substantial percentage of cases, violence against women in politics is not taken seriously until it escalates into physical violence.

Most respondents who took part in this study firmly believe that violence neither scared nor discouraged them, although some reported that they expressed their viewpoints in public less frequently after they experienced violence, that they deleted their

social media profiles, that they felt discouraged or hurt, some even quit politics. Others reported they were “more cautious” in their public appearances. This study’s qualitative research showed that women who have experienced or are experiencing violence in politics often develop serious health problems due to the stress they are exposed to on a daily basis.

I went to gastroscopy every half a year, took pills, I was in a low mood. I am not cut out for this. Maybe someday in some healthier, more democratic environment there will be a place for me, and I may fit in, but I have been unable to fit in now. I could not cope with attacks on my personality and my private life. After every meeting I would spend four days curled up in bed

⁵⁰ UN General Assembly (2018), p. 7/21.

with stomach problems, because I knew backlash was coming. Why? I have no hope left anymore. I used to be hopeful, but now that I know how things actually work and what happens behind the scenes, my hopes have been reduced to a minimum.

Respondent, Croat, 35-44

When violent behaviour fails to intimidate, discourage and make women give up on their political activism, or force them to submit to the will of the majority or toe the perpetrator's party line, their family members often pay the price. A respondent described the mobbing her husband was subjected to because of her politics and the views she publicly expressed:

My husband was mobbed for two years. They did not allow him to do his job. He was supposed to sit around for two years, in effect he spent that time on sick leave, he was going to a therapist regularly. He paid the highest price for my political views. My kids, fortunately, do not work in my town, and my eldest son was upset with me a million times. He could not understand why I do this. As a consequence of it all I went for gastroscopy and received three diagnoses, gullet, stomach, ulcer, second-degree GERD. It literally feels like a heart attack, that is why I called the ambulance in the first place; I thought I was having a heart attack. People ask me how I was able to deal with gastroscopy, how I could swallow the tube. Believe me, I would rather go for gastroscopy every three months than swallow the things I had to swallow.

Respondent, Croat, 45-54

In addition to individual consequences felt by every woman who is subjected to violence, the broader consequences of violence against women in politics are of a much greater magnitude. This violence reinforces traditional stereotypes and roles given to women, using domination and control to dissuade and exclude women from politics. It is uniquely concerning as a barrier to women's ability to participate equally in political life and as a serious hurdle for inclusive and sustainable democracy⁵¹.

Victim-blaming is a common characteristic of all forms of violence against women⁵², thus victims of all forms of gender-based violence are often faced with libel charges, further marginalised, or humiliated by the police who do not take them seriously. The consequences can be even more severe for women active in politics and enjoying a public profile as they can be perceived as politically disloyal or unreliable, and find themselves exposed to criticism regarding their ability to do their job, which can have

devastating effects on their careers. As a result, many victims of violence refrain from reporting or publicly addressing the violence they survived, and the perpetrators remain unpunished⁵³.

There is virtually no data or standardised indicators for measuring the incidence of violence against women in politics and during election cycles, since such violence is usually treated as a series of isolated incidents, rather than a manifestation of widespread, structural discrimination of women in public and political life⁵⁴.

51 National Democratic Institute (2017), p. 12.

52 UN Women (2018).

53 UN General Assembly (2018), p. 7/21; Filion (2016), p. 7.

54 UN General Assembly (2018), p. 7/21.

5.1. SANCTIONING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

Violence against women in politics is often tolerated and considered normal, especially in contexts and societies where patriarchal values are deeply entrenched⁵⁵ along with the perception that women should be restricted to the private sphere (caring for home and family), that politics is not relevant for women's everyday lives and needs, and that women are incompetent and ineffective leaders⁵⁶. From this it follows that public awareness as well as the activities on combating violence against women in politics are also limited by gender-based stereotypes which are often projected in the media and the social networks⁵⁷.

Because of the culture of silence, stigmatisation and impunity, all forms of violence against women are generally

not reported. This is the case with violence against women in politics where women who have experienced violence would rather cover up the incident out of fear of being perceived as weak or not competent enough for the world of politics⁵⁸. If violence does not result in visible bodily harm, law enforcement agencies often dismiss reports of threats, harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence because they consider these part and parcel of political engagement⁵⁹.

I passed the information to friends and acquaintances with contacts in the police to see what could be done. I was told to report, but that they were generally unable to do anything as long as the person did not attack me physically. These verbal threats are not considered at all. That is terrifying.

Respondent, Croat, 25-34

55 Bardall (2018b).

56 UN General Assembly (2018), p. 6/21.

57 *Ibid.*

58 UN Women (2018), UN General Assembly (2018).

59 UN General Assembly (2018), p. 7/21.

As many as 60.5 per cent of the respondents who have experienced violence never contacted anyone in connection with the violence they experienced. Those who did mostly turned to their party members and leaders, the police, the prosecutor's office, NGOs, the Human Rights Ombudsman, international organisations, and foreign embassies. This usually does not yield any results, especially not in the form of adequate sanctions.

As to whether women felt protected from all forms of violence against women in their political party or the parliament in which they sit, the respondents were generally not sure (44.6 per cent), while 33.7 per cent of them do not feel that women are protected from violence.



6. Conclusions and recommendations for the prevention and elimination of violence against women in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Political parties have a key role in creating the preconditions for a raise in the number of women active in politics, which includes ensuring that women feel safe in the premises of their parties and in the company of other party members. Considering that a significant share of the respondents reported that political parties have either no mechanisms to protect women from violence, or have inadequate ones in place, *political parties should adopt codes of conduct to address, amongst other things, the problem of unwelcome sexual comments, sexual harassment, psychological and all other forms of violence against women, and lay down sanctions for those party members who do not abide by the provisions of the codes.* The sanctions should be implemented in an effective and timely manner, and measures should be taken to support the victims and ensure protection from the perpetrators.

Women politicians are often discouraged from publicly voicing their political opinions, which undermines democratic processes and creates an unfavourable environment for greater participation of women in politics. Because political parties exert a strong

influence on their members' and sympathisers' views, it is necessary that they continually demonstrate commitment to non-violent political action, work on sensitising their membership to the damaging effects of violence against women in politics, and to cooperate with law enforcement agencies in order to ensure that the perpetrators are adequately punished in accordance with the laws of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Parliaments, assemblies and councils in Bosnia and Herzegovina must ensure compliance with the law at the highest level, and create a safe environment for women's political participation. Unfortunately, a substantial share of the respondents point out the problems they face in discharging their duties as MPs and councillors which often include very violent and aggressive comments, blackmail, and threats directed at women. *It is therefore important that all parliaments, assemblies and councils in Bosnia and Herzegovina adopt and enforce codes of conduct to address, amongst other things, the problem of unwelcome sexual comments, sexual harassment, psychological and all other forms of violence against women, as well as ensure that mechanisms are put in place to protect women from all forms of violence in politics.*

Judiciary and law enforcement in most cases treat as violence against women only those acts of violence which result in visible bodily injury, although the most frequently occurring form of violence against women in general, not only in politics, is psychological violence. Violence against women in politics must not be understood solely in terms of physical injuries, especially because it is commonly manifested in non-violent actions which rely on narratives reaffirming conservative ideas about a woman's place in society. *Judicial and law-enforcement authorities should therefore train their employees so as to enable them to recognise violence against women in politics, act in cases where violence is reported, and take appropriate measures within their scope of competence even if there has been no bodily harm. Threats of violence must be taken seriously, and more attention must be paid to violence committed using information technologies, especially the social media.*

Institutional gender equality mechanisms should prioritise the examination of not only the gender dimension of political violence, but also the political dimension of gender-based violence, and, based on the findings of this examination, devise a strategic approach to addressing violence against women in politics, one of the main reasons given by women for abandoning politics or not daring to engage in it in the first place. Therefore, *gender institutions must establish mechanisms for monitoring and keeping records of the cases of violence against women in politics, and report periodically to relevant institutions, government bodies, and political parties.*

It is also important that institutional gender equality mechanisms to advocate for consistent implementation of the Istanbul Convention and the criminalisation of the forms of violence listed in it, starting from sexual harassment and sexual extortion, which are still not criminalised in the criminal codes of the Federation of BiH and Brčko District.

The media have a key role in presenting the image of women politicians to the broader public, which entails great responsibility for balanced reporting and the inclusion of women in reporting, especially reporting about certain political processes. A considerable share of the respondents think that the media play a significant role in encouraging violence against women in politics, and they also report that the media often either ignore them or prioritise stereotypical comments regarding women politicians' outward appearance or personal lives, which sidelines their political commitment and efforts. *Therefore the media should regularly assess if women and women's policies are adequately represented in their reporting, and adopt a zero-tolerance approach to gender-based violence in their editorial policies, which should extend to the readers' comments in the social media. The media should also cooperate with law enforcement agencies in order to ensure that the perpetrators are adequately punished in accordance with the laws of Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

Appendix i – References



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Okvirna strategija za provedbu Konvencije o prevenciji i borbi protiv nasilja nad ženama i nasilja u porodici u Bosni i Hercegovini (2015-2018).

Appendix ii – Research methodology

In order to obtain answers to the study questions, a methodology was developed which comprised a review of previous research, as well as field research which included 18 in-depth interviews with women politicians who have experienced gender-based violence. The respondents who indicated in the questionnaire that they agreed to be contacted for more information were selected for the interviews. All interviews were conducted in person, with the exception of two conducted via Skype, and all the respondents were given an informed consent form to familiarise themselves with the goals of the research, as well as to inform them that all the data collected for this report would be anonymous so as to avoid revealing the respondents' identities.

In addition to the interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire aimed at women politicians in BiH was available online for a period of two weeks in March 2019. The questionnaire was also anonymous; it comprised up to 52 questions (the total number of questions depended on some of the answers) divided into four sets: (1) demographic questions, (2) questions on political

participation, (3) questions on attitudes towards violence against women in politics, and (4) questions on the experience of violence against women in politics. In the final question the respondents were asked to leave their contact information if they wished to be visited by a researcher to be interviewed on the details of their experience. The questionnaire was filled in by 83 women politicians from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Distribution of the Questionnaire on Violence Against Women in BiH

The questionnaire was widely distributed via email and was sent directly to all political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, all the parliaments and cantonal assemblies, and to most city and municipal councils⁶⁰. The number of completed questionnaires points to a lack of a systematic distribution of information within parties, seeing that the questionnaire was not forwarded to most women politicians. It points as well as to denying women politicians access to information by their own political parties, especially at a local level of administration. The small number of completed questionnaires also points to a strong sense of reticence on the part women to share their experiences with gender-based violence, and lends credibility to the assumption that violence against women in politics is probably a lot more widespread than this study has been able to measure.

⁶⁰ The questionnaire was sent to all the city and municipal councils whose official e-mail address was listed on the official website of the city or municipality at the time of research.

How to Interpret the Data from the Questionnaire

If percentages presented in the data do not always add up to 100 per cent, this is mostly because of rounding up, subtracting answers such as “do not know” or “not applicable”, or because the respondents were allowed to give multiple answers.

Limitations of the Study

There are two significant limitations of this study: the data was collected and analysed over a very short period of time (15 February – 30 March 2019), and the research did not include men and the general population. These limitations may be justified by the purpose of this study, which was to map the forms of violence against women in politics in BiH so that the study could serve as the basis for further, more detailed analyses, as well as to record the specific experiences of the women who have experienced gender-based violence in politics.

Demographic and Political Composition of the Respondents

Eighty-three women politicians, ranging in age from 18 to over 55, from 37 cities and municipalities in BiH took part in the study. They declared themselves as Bosnians-Herzegovinians, (21.7 per cent), Bosniaks (34.9 per cent), Croats (18.1 per cent), Jews (1.2 per cent), Serbs (19.35), Roma (1.2 per cent) and Other (3.6 per cent). Most of them have a university degree, of which 36.1 per cent have finished undergraduate studies, 40.9 per cent have master's degrees, whilst 13.2 per cent have PhDs. Most of them (77.1 per cent) are fully employed (40 or more hours a week). Most of them (90.3 per cent) are members of a political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 27.7 per cent hold a post in the party presidency, 28.9 per cent sit on the main board, 3.6 per cent on the supervisory board, whilst 71.1 per cent are members of the women's wing of their party. At the local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 50.6 per cent of the respondents ran for a city/municipal council, 8.4 per cent ran for mayor's/municipal

mayor's office. Furthermore, 39.7 per cent of the respondents ran for cantonal assemblies, 15.6 per cent for the Parliament of the Federation BiH, 7.2 per cent for the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska, 16.9 per cent for the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, and 2.4 per cent ran for the presidency of BiH. Only 9.6 per cent of the respondents have never contested an election in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Of all the respondents, 66.3 per cent have won seats and mandates, 4.8 per cent declined seats and mandates for various reasons. At the moment, 15.6 per cent of them sit on a city/municipal council, 20.5 per cent sit in a cantonal assembly, whilst 12 per cent of the respondents sit in entity- or state-level parliaments. Most respondents are currently in their first (28.9 per cent) or second (13.2 per cent) term. No respondents held a ministerial office at the time of writing, while 14.5 per cent of the respondents performed some other public function.





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