Sexism, harassment, and violence against women parliamentarians in New Zealand

Introduction

In 2016, the Inter-Parliamentary Union Bureau of Women Parliamentarians conducted a study on sexism, harassment, and violence against women in parliaments in Europe. The Bureau interviewed 55 women MPs from 39 countries, with the results revealing that sexism and gender-based violence is widespread. It occurs on a daily basis and is highly detrimental to the wellbeing and careers of female politicians.

In 2018, the New Zealand chapter of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) undertook a scoping exercise to gauge the depth of the problem and gain statistics on the occurrence of these behaviours in the New Zealand Parliament. This exercise was based on the assertion that all New Zealand women deserve a workplace free of sexism, harassment, and violence. These findings will provide a baseline measure of the negative issues we need to address, as we seek to create not only a better parliament, but a better society for everyone.
Definitions

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines such violence as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”¹

Such violence affects one in every three women in the world.² It may be physical, sexual, psychological, or economic in nature, and no society, culture, or socioeconomic class is immune to it. According to the conceptual work done by the international campaign #NotTheCost, Stopping Violence against Women in Politics, three characteristics distinguish violence against women in politics:

- It targets women because of their gender
- In its very form it can be gendered, as exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence
- Its impact is to discourage women, in particular, from being or becoming active in politics.³

Such violence clearly constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the obligation to ensure that women can participate in political processes fully, freely, and in all security, as enshrined in several international instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In addition, while behaviour and acts affecting women in politics take the form of ordinary sexism, in many cases they are often part of a broader stereotype that women “are not made for” or “should not meddle in” politics. Women engaged in or wishing to enter politics are consequently discouraged, and their access to leadership positions and their ability to fulfil their mandate as elected officials is considerably hindered.

Methodology

This report presents the results of a CWP New Zealand survey on the experiences of women parliamentarians and the New Zealand Parliament as an institution.

This report is based on quantitative and qualitative data provided voluntarily by 16 women parliamentarians from Labour, National, the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, and New Zealand First. The anonymous survey was circulated to the 24 members of the CWP New Zealand group. Each of these women vary in their personal, professional, and political experiences.

Respondents were asked to describe their experiences of harassment, intimidation, or violence; the prevalence and culture of such acts or behaviour; and the consequences experienced as a direct result of said behaviour. Given the sensitive
nature of the topic, all responses have been treated in strictest confidence and all survey data was collected anonymously.

The survey does not attempt to compare violence against women in politics with that against women in general, or to compare the experience of women parliamentarians with that of women in other professions or fields that until recently have been exclusively or predominantly held by men.

**Overview of results**

The survey is not based on a statistically representative sample, however the findings indicate that sexism, harassment, and violence against women parliamentarians is widespread in New Zealand as is the case internationally. As shown in Figure I, the findings reveal a troubling prevalence, particularly with psychological violence (the most widespread form) affecting 44 percent of the respondents. Psychological violence was defined in the survey as any “remarks, gestures and images of a sexist or humiliating sexual nature made against you, and threats and/or mobbing to which you might have been subjected.”

Recurring themes in respondents’ descriptions of these experiences were feelings of embarrassment, belittlement, and unworthiness. Psychological violence was inflicted by a mix of strangers and colleagues.

Fellow members of Parliament are shown to be common perpetrators of sexist or humiliating remarks, with multiple respondents indicating that such comments are prevalent among party colleagues, across parties, as well as in core work environments such as select committees.

This type of psychological violence is commonly downplayed, whether acknowledged to be not unique to the parliamentary environment, seen as expected in any job, or viewed as part of the “culture of Parliament”.

![I: Prevalence of Violence](image-url)
Among the kinds of psychological violence, 44 per cent of those surveyed said they had received threats of death, rape, beatings, or abduction during their parliamentary term (Figure II).

![II: Types of Psychological Violence](image)

Regarding harassment, multiple respondents described being touched inappropriately at public meetings on their back or bottom, and being the subject of inappropriate remarks in a public setting.

Threats of physical violence are more common online or in written correspondence from constituents and members of the public. This can result not only in shaken confidence, but in missed opportunities. Conversely, some respondents suggested that receipt of such comments made them more determined in their work.

Among those who experienced abuse and considered reporting it, the vast majority chose not to do so. 86 percent of respondents had not reported abuse due to not knowing who to go to for support, not wanting to relive the event, or simply deciding to put up with it.

Other noteworthy data includes:

- Two respondents had reconsidered running for another term due to these experiences
- Five respondents had experienced sexual harassment in previous careers, including two who had been assaulted and one who was propositioned for sexual favours
- Common ways of dealing with the issues included seeking support from female colleagues or ignoring the problem.

While the prevalence of other forms of violence—such as sexual, physical, or economic—is lower, their occurrence at all is highly troubling, especially as these behaviours go unreported and are therefore unsanctioned.
Conclusions

The survey has revealed the common occurrence of sexual harassment and gender-based violence against women parliamentarians in New Zealand, reflecting the situation in parliaments throughout the world. That these kinds of experiences should result in even a single woman parliamentarian deciding to ignore the abuse or reconsider her involvement in public office is a worrying indictment on our social and political structures.

These findings suggest that such behaviour against women parliamentarians affects a significant number of elected officials. Such violence impedes the ability of women parliamentarians to do their work freely and securely, and has a dissuading effect on women’s political engagement in general. Harassment of this kind may discourage future women leaders from entering politics or seeking promotion.

Such behaviour must no longer be viewed as “just the price to be paid” for political involvement. It is the duty of political actors, men and women, and of parliaments as institutions to set the right examples. Sexism, harassment, and violence against women parliamentarians, and against women in Parliament, prevents Parliament from being inclusive and representative of the society it serves.

Sexist behaviour, psychological and sexual harassment, and gender-based violence is unequivocally unacceptable in New Zealand’s Parliament. The following recommendations from the Inter-Parliamentary Union will help enforce a zero-tolerance approach:

- The establishment of a confidential, fair, and responsive complaints and investigation mechanism
- Disciplinary sanctions for perpetrators
- Workplace training on respect at work and how to recognise and fight sexism and harassment
- The provision of independent, confidential, and expert counselling services for victims.

If sexual harassment and abuse is no longer tolerated and legitimised within Parliament, a clear message will be sent to society, helping to eliminate harassment and abuse in other spheres of public and private life. Parliament must be a model institution at all levels. The effectiveness of parliaments, progress toward gender equality, and the vitality of democracy all depend on it.

The New Zealand Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians will continue to monitor developments in this area and will support all efforts to combat sexism, sexual harassment, and violence toward women parliamentarians and indeed all women in Aotearoa.

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We thank all the women parliamentarians who participated in this survey.

1 Declaration on the elimination of violence against women, UN General Assembly resolution 48/104, 1993.
3 #NotTheCost: stopping violence against women in politics: a call to action, Washington, DC, National Democratic Institute (NDI), 2016. In 2016, NDI launched an international campaign called #NotTheCost, Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics, based on an alliance of partner organizations fighting against violence against women active in politics. IPU was part of this alliance.