A special report by the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians New Zealand Group.

Introduction

In 2018, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 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 purpose of revealing that sexism and gender-based violence is widespread. It occurs on a daily basis and is highly detrimental to the well-being 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.”

Such violence affects one in every three women in the world. 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. Such violence clearly constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the obligation to ensure that women can participate in political processes freely, fairly, 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 fulfill their mandate as elected officials is considerably hindered.

Methodology

This report presents the results of a Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (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; their occurrence at all is highly troubling, especially as the behaviour is commonly downplayed, considered reporting it, the vast majority chose not to do so. 86% of respondents admitted that 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 Table 1, the findings reveal a troubling prevalence, particularly with psychological violence (the most widespread form) affecting 44% 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’. Among the kinds of psychological violence, 44% of those surveyed said they had received threats of death, rape, beatings, or abduction during their parliamentary term (Table 2). Regarding harassment, multiple responders described being touched inappropriately at public meetings on their back or bottom, and being the subject of inappropriate remarks in a public setting.

TABLE 1: Prevalence of Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Violence</th>
<th>Experienced</th>
<th>Witnessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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% of respondents admitted that they were not known who to go to for support, not wanting to relive the event, or simply deciding to put it 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.
SEXISM, HARRASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS IN NEW ZEALAND

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 disquieting effect on women’s political engagement in general. Harassment of this kind may discourage future women’s political engagement in New Zealand, and has a dissuading effect on women’s political engagement 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.

References:

Below: The main chamber of the Parliament of New Zealand.

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians from Fiji and New Zealand share valuable lessons through parliamentary exchanges

A delegation of eight women Members of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji spent a useful week in New Zealand, learning and sharing knowledge with counterparts from the Parliament of New Zealand.

The delegation from Fiji, including three Ministers, an Assistant Minister, and four MPs, were in New Zealand as part of an ongoing Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians programme of parliamentary capacity and relationship-building between women Parliamentarians in the CPA Pacific Region. The delegation enjoyed a busy schedule, engaging in a series of workshops and building connections with New Zealand Parliamentarians.

Highlights of the week included meetings with the New Zealand Prime Minister, Rt Hon. Jacinda Ardern, MP; the Speaker of Parliament, Rt Hon. Trevor Mallard, MP and a wide range of Ministers, former and current MPs.

Workshops were shaped around important and current parliamentary issues which included engagement and communication, dealing with social media, effective chairing, managing office budgets, advocacy, and effectively representing constituencies. The workshops were delivered by cross-party Members, including Barbara Koringa, MP; Louisa Wall, MP; Jo Hayes, MP; Anahila Kanongata’a-Suisuiki, MP; and Dr Parmjeet Parmar, MP.

While most of the programme was in Wellington at the Parliament of New Zealand, the Fijian delegates also had the chance to go to Auckland and Christchurch for an electorate programme, visiting electorate offices and shadowing members and Ministers for a day.

Reflecting on the week, Rt Hon. Trevor Mallard, Speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives, said: “This was a really special opportunity and I am so pleased we could host almost all the women in Fiji’s Parliament. There are now record numbers of women in both our Parliaments, with 20% in Fiji and 40.8% in New Zealand, and the week solidified relationships between them. I know that these connections will endure and be an important platform for sharing experiences and supporting one another. Representation of women in the Pacific region is low and therefore programmes such as this are an important way to build relationships, mentor, and share best practice between women MPs.”

The programme ran from 18 to 22 February 2019, with the delegation including Members from both Government and Opposition parties. It comprised Hon. Premila Kumar, MP; Hon. Mereseini Vuniwaqa, MP; Hon. Rosy Akbar, MP; Hon. Ro Teimumu Kepa, MP; Hon. Salote Radrodro, MP; Hon. Sela Adimaitega, MP; Hon. Lynda Taba, MP; and Hon. Ailua Goniwaravu, MP.

The programme was coordinated by Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives with support from the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians.

Images: Parliament of New Zealand.