



JULIA GILLARD NEXT GENERATION
INTERNSHIP REPORT 2020–21

THE MISSING WOMEN OF AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

How violence against
women creates barriers
to female representation

By Medha Majumdar

ABORIGINAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

EMILY's List Australia proudly acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first people and Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely. We acknowledge and respect that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are steeped in traditions and customs built on an incredibly disciplined social and cultural order. This social and cultural order has sustained up by 50,000 years of existence.

We acknowledge the ongoing leadership role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community on gender equality. As First Peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are best placed to determine a culturally appropriate path to gender equality in their communities.

In this document, 'Aboriginal' refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Contents

INTRODUCTION FROM THE CONVENORS	4
AUTHOR	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
INTRODUCTION.....	8
Research framework: Following the political pipeline.....	10
Methodology	11
Diversity and intersectionality	12
PART 1: WOMEN AND GIRLS INTERESTED IN POLITICS	13
The gender gap in political ambition persists.....	14
Violence against women in politics further discourages girls from entering political careers	15
The focus on women’s experience in politics has galvanised action for gender equality	18
Recommendations	20
PART 2: EMPLOYEES AND VOLUNTEERS	21
Women experience abuse while working in politics	22
Experiences of abuse significantly limits women’s career advancement	24
Workplace conditions and culture in politics makes women vulnerable to abuse.....	25
There is limited awareness and confidence in reporting mechanisms	27
Reporting mechanisms must be transparent, confidential, independent, and deliver prompt resolutions with direct consequences for perpetrators	29
An independent complaints mechanism in Parliament House must promote confidence in its processes	31
Support structures and informal mechanisms should be strengthened	33
Recommendations	35
PART 3: CANDIDATES	36
Candidates face intimidation to dissuade them from running in pre-selection contests.....	37
Candidates experience abuse and harassment during election campaigns	41
Recommendations	44
PART 4: MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT.....	45
Violence against women parliamentarians is a global issue	46
Abuse and harassment from members of the public is substantial	47
Harassment and bullying occurs between members of parliament.....	52
Experiences of abuse, harassment and bullying contributes to women leaving politics.....	53
Recommendations	55
CONCLUSION.....	56
Summary of recommendations.....	57

Figures

FIGURE 1: Plan International Australia survey – Differences in attitudes towards gender and politics between girls and boys	15
FIGURE 2: Fawcett Society UK survey – ‘Accusations of sexual harassment in politics makes me less likely to get involved in politics’	16
FIGURE 3: ELA JGNGI survey – Prevalence of violence against women in politics	23
FIGURE 4: ELA JGNGI survey – Impact of violence against women in politics on career progression.....	24
FIGURE 5: ELA JGNGI survey – Satisfaction, awareness and confidence in complaints procedures	27
FIGURE 6: ELA JGNGI survey – Significant proportion of violence against women in politics is not reported	28
FIGURE 7: ELA JGNGI survey – Sources of support for women experiencing violence in politics	33
FIGURE 8: Inter-Parliamentary Union survey – Prevalence of violence against women parliamentarians globally	46

Introduction from the Convenors

The recent revelations of sexual harassment and assault within Parliament House in Canberra has exposed political organisations as unsafe workplaces, where violence against women in politics is commonplace. From the bravery of Brittany Higgins, the women initiating the *March4Justice*, to the recent ABC *Ms Represented* series, women have said enough is enough. The environment in which this research was conducted has seen a massive shift in the public awareness of the issue of violence against women in politics from when it was first initiated in 2019.

EMILY's List Australia is proud to release *The Missing Women of Australian Politics: How violence against women creates barriers to female representation*, the third report of the Julia Gillard Next Generation Internship. Developed in partnership with our first female Prime Minister, the Julia Gillard Next Generation Internship gives life to the Gillard legacy and fulfils a long-term ambition of EMILY's List Australia – to promote and make political life easier for the next generation of talented progressive women leaders.

A Missing Women of Australian Politics has been prepared by Medha Majumdar, our third recipient of the Gillard Internship. Medha's report reveals the negative impact of violence against women in pursuit of political careers at all stages of their involvement in the political process. It paints a bleak picture of treatment of women in politics in Australia. It shows how the experiences effect women from when they are girls first expressing their interest in politics, to when they become women in senior public office. This has undoubtedly limited the progress of women's political representation and leadership in Australia.

The report makes recommendations to reduce the prevalence of abuse and harassment in politics. They seek to raise awareness, and improve support structures and reporting mechanisms, to enact cultural change in politics in Australia and have been informed by work being done internationally. This is a global problem faced by women seeking political office or working within the business of politics.

Medha is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University (ANU), and Fox International Fellow at Yale University. She is a recipient of the Westpac Future Leaders Scholarship. Prior to commencing her PhD studies, Medha held roles in criminal justice policy in Australia, and political and economic development research in India. She is committed to community service and has worked extensively with organisations in the areas of education accessibility and migrant support. Medha holds a Bachelor of Politics, Philosophy and Economic (Honours) from ANU.

This was a difficult time to be undertaking the internship. Having made the decision to defer the travel component of the research during the uncertainty of 2020, Medha also had to forego the opportunity to travel to the UK in 2021. She then undertook a virtual study tour to explore the work being done in organisations described in this report.

Once again, this project would not be possible without the ongoing support of our sponsors.

Principal Sponsors Slater and Gordon Lawyers, we especially thank John Somerville, Phil Reed and Jackie Trad for championing the program.

Major sponsors Australian Workers Union, in a time when travel was not possible, we greatly appreciate the continued support and valuable input of Dan Walton and Misha Zelinsky.

Finally, we acknowledge the work the intern selection committee members Katie Whitehead, Meghan Hopper, Misha Zelinsky, Tracey Madden, and EMILY's List Australia CEO Maree Overall, and all the women who shared their stories to inform this research.

We believe that having more women at all levels of the decision-making process does create cultural change and we will use these recommendations in our work to get more women elected. We commend this report to you and look forward to seeing the implementation of its recommendations to create a safe and inclusive environment for everyone who participates in the political process.



Sharon Claydon and Leigh Svendsen
National Co-Convenors ELA



Sharon Claydon



Leigh Svendsen

Since 1996, EMILY's List has supported 577 Labor women candidates, with 284 successfully elected to Federal, State or Territory parliaments. This is a standout achievement in our 25th anniversary year.

If the ALP is to achieve its aim to preselect 50% women candidates by 2025, EMILY's List Australia need to ensure there is a pipeline of women ready to represent their communities.

The Gillard Internship provides a young or emerging woman leader with the opportunity to:

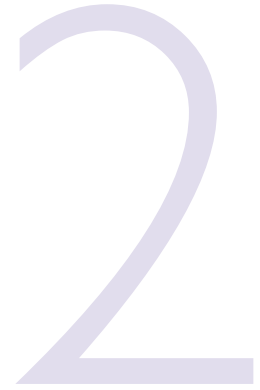
- undertake research into best practice gender equality policy and program initiatives across the world & to bring back learnings for the benefit of Australian women.
- travel overseas and meet with progressive women leaders
- work with a progressive Labor woman MPs and receive direct mentoring & support
- learn about the importance of fundraising & relationship building for progressive campaigns



Author

Medha Majumdar is the Julia Gillard Next Generation Intern 2020-21 with EMILY's List Australia (ELA). The Julia Gillard Next Generation Internship (JNGI) is an opportunity for young women to develop the skills to become the next generation of progressive female parliamentarians. It provides them with a chance to research best practice strategies and policies in place around the world to get more women elected.

Medha is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University (ANU), and Fox International Fellow at Yale University. She is a recipient of the Westpac Future Leaders Scholarship. Prior to commencing her PhD studies, Medha held roles in criminal justice policy in Australia, and political and economic development research in India. She is committed to community service and has worked extensively with organisations in the areas of education accessibility and migrant support. Medha holds a Bachelor of Politics, Philosophy and Economic (Honours) from ANU.



Executive summary

The recent revelations of sexual harassment and assault within Parliament House in Canberra has sparked a national conversation about the culture of politics in Australia. It has exposed political organisations as unsafe workplaces, where violence against women in politics is commonplace. Violence against women in politics refers to the intimidation, harassment, abuse, and bullying of women as political actors. This includes when they are volunteers, staffers, candidates, and parliamentarians. While there has been growing attention on this issue, there is little research or evidence on how abuse and harassment creates a barriers to women’s political representation, as well as the opportunities for reform.

The purpose of this report is to examine how violence against women in politics has affected the progress of women’s political leadership in Australia. In doing so, it investigates the prevalence, causes, and consequences of violence against women in political parties and Parliament House. Furthermore, through analysis of examples of international best practice, this report makes recommendations to achieve substantive change.

Through interviews with current and former Members of Parliament (MPs), election candidates, and political staffers, as well as an anonymous survey of women with experience in politics at all levels of government, this report paints a bleak picture of treatment of women in politics in Australia. It shows how experiences of abuse negatively impact women from when they are girls first expressing their interest in politics, to when they become women in senior public office. Violence against women in politics is found to have significantly limited the progress of women’s political representation and leadership in Australia.

However, Australia is not alone in facing the challenge of reducing violence against women in politics. Other countries have begun substantive work to make their parliaments and political parties safer. This report draws on analysis of international examples of progress, primarily from the United Kingdom with a similar Westminster system of government. In doing so, it makes recommendations to reduce the prevalence of abuse and harassment in politics. These recommendations seek to raise awareness, and improve support structures and reporting mechanisms, to enact cultural change in politics in Australia.



Introduction

In March 2021, over 110,000 people joined protests across Australia. The *March 4 Justice* protests called for an end to sexual harassment and abuse of women, and systematic reforms to the structures which protect perpetrators in workplaces. The protests were a galvanising moment in Australian history and the fight to achieve gender equality. It came after a national conversation about violence against women was sparked by political party staffer, Brittany Higgins' decision to speak publicly about being raped by a colleague in a ministerial office in Parliament. Her bravery encouraged others to share their stories of abuse and harassment while working in politics.¹ The movement to end gendered violence has brought sustained attention to the culture of politics and the Australian Parliament.

Australia is not alone in its focus on the experience of women in politics. In 2011, US Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot in the head in an attempted assassination while she met with constituents outside a grocery store. In 2016, the murder of British MP, Jo Cox, brought sustained global attention to the critical issue of violence against women in politics. She too was on her way to meet with constituents. These horrific attacks highlighted for many the harassment, intimidation, and abuse women MPs face while doing their work, and the dire consequences of when such behaviours continue unchallenged.² Violence against women in politics is a growing issue globally. While there has been progress towards gaining equal representation in politics and achieving better policy outcomes for women, there is increasing backlash to women's empowerment.³

Violence against women in politics is defined as the intimidation, harassment, abuse, and bullying of women as political actors.⁴ Attacks on women in politics occurs through five primary forms of violence: physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and symbolic violence.⁵ The Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 81.8 per cent of women parliamentarians had experienced a form of violence within their term in office.⁶ Violence is aimed at women involved in politics because of their gender, and prevents them from accessing political

1 Annabel Crabb, "One of Australia's Most Experienced Legislators Alleges She Was Sexually Assaulted at Old Parliament House," *ABC News*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-09/kate-sullivan-alleges-sexual-assault-in-parliament/100273484>.

2 Hannah Jones, "More in Common: The Domestication of Misogynist White Supremacy and the Assassination of Jo Cox," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 14 (2019): 2431–49.

3 Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "Gender and Political Violence in Latin America," *Politica* 23, no. 1 (2016): 34.

4 Krook and Sanín.

5 Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "The Cost of Doing Politics? Analyzing Violence and Harassment against Female Politicians," *Perspectives on Politics*, 2019, 1–16.

6 Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians" (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016), <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>.

power.⁷ Women can experience abuse and harassment as volunteers, staffers, candidates, and leaders in politics. The perpetrators may be members of political parties, fellow or opposition parliamentarians, and members of the public.

In Australia, facing abuse has long been considered an unavoidable part of being active in politics. The male-dominated culture within the Australian Parliament has protected those who harass or intimidate female parliamentarians and staffers.⁸ Women active in politics have been warned against speaking out about abuse, in case they are seen as a liability. They are pushed not to protest, in order to avoid being labelled as too ‘weak’ for politics. Furthermore, the prevalence of violence is growing rapidly in Australia, as threats and aggression towards women in politics are spreading online.⁹ This mirrors the abuse women outside of politics increasingly also face on social media.¹⁰ The threat of violence is a significant barrier for women to enter public office. The hostility that women political leaders face is further amplified by their often disparaging and sexist treatment in the mainstream media.¹¹ Young women interested in politics are forced to consider the risk of enduring harm when pursuing their leadership ambition.

While there is a growing national conversation about abuse and harassment of women in politics, there is still limited understanding of this issue. There has been no comprehensive research exposing how intimidation and abuse challenge women’s political representation in Australia. The purpose of this report is to examine how violence against women in politics has affected the progress of women’s political leadership in Australia. In doing so, it investigates the prevalence, causes, and consequences of violence against women in political parties and in their workplace. It presents recommendations and opportunities for change to reduce the prevalence of abuse and harassment in politics and improve women’s political representation in Australia.

7 Cheryl N. Collier and Tracey Raney, “Understanding Sexism and Sexual Harassment in Politics: A Comparison of Westminster Parliaments in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 25, no. 3 (2018): 432–55.

8 Collier and Raney.

9 Cheryl N. Collier and Tracey Raney, “Another Barrier for Women in Politics: Violence,” *The Conversation*, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/another-barrier-for-women-in-politics-violence-113637>; Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Political Violence against Women Tracked for First Time as Attacks Soar,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2019, sec. Global development, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jun/10/political-attacks-women-tracked-first-time-surge-violence>.

10 Amnesty International, “Why Twitter Is a Toxic Place for Women” (Amnesty International, 2018), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/#topanchor>.

11 Blair Williams, “It’s a Man’s World at the Top: Gendered Media Representations of Julia Gillard and Helen Clark,” *Feminist Media Studies* 0, no. 0 (2020): 1–20; Blair E Williams, “A Tale of Two Women: A Comparative Gendered Media Analysis of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2021): 398–420.



Research framework: Following the political pipeline

This report traces the impact of experiences of violence against women in politics from girls to women in senior public office, along the ‘political pipeline’.¹² The concept of the political pipeline recognises that those active within political parties and parliamentary offices, working in both unpaid and paid positions, often later run for public office themselves. The research framework and structure of this report is based on following women as they chart their political careers. First, as young women and girls interested in politics. Second, as volunteers and employees of political organisations taking the first steps of more active participation in politics. Third, as candidates for elections putting their hand up for public office. Finally, as members of parliament. This approach collects evidence across the spectrum of professional experiences in politics to understand the flow on effects of violence against women in politics.

The purpose of this research framework is to examine how experiences of violence at each stage of the political journey force some women to leave politics prematurely. Young women and girls who may be interested in politics are discouraged from becoming politically active upon seeing hostile treatment of female political leaders.¹³ Experiences of harassment in the early stages of women’s political careers, such as when they are a volunteer or staffer, can deter them from staying involved in politics. There is little research on the prevalence of abuse in the early stages of women’s political careers, despite attrition at this stage having important long-term implications for women’s representation.¹⁴ The United Nations notes that violence against women in politics ‘has a chilling impact on the political ambition of young women, with intergenerational consequences for the full realisation of their political rights.’¹⁵

Furthermore, this research framework highlights the central theme of this study – culture. The culture of Parliament House has been widely criticised in the wake of reports of sexual harassment and assault in politics. The culture of an institution is the product of the people and the accepted behaviours within it. It is therefore important to understand who gets to succeed in politics in Australia, and who is pushed out because of experiences of violence. The people who remain in politics and take up positions of seniority are those who set the culture and expectations. By tracing the experiences of women from early political careers to senior levels, the findings of this study illuminate the culture at each stage in the political pipeline.

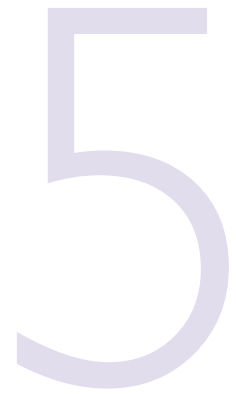
12 Adam M. Dynes et al., “Personality and Gendered Selection Processes in the Political Pipeline,” *Politics & Gender*, 2019, 1–21.

13 Tory Shepherd, “Gillard ‘treatment’ a Political Turnoff,” *The Advertiser*, January 14, 2014, <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/more-women-turning-off-politics-after-julia-gillard-was-badly-treated/news-story/321177664cf100e0316704bad5c5f8a6>.

14 Mona Lena Krook, “Westminster Too: On Sexual Harassment in British Politics,” *The Political Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2018): 65–72.

15 Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women UN, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on Violence against Women in Politics,” 2018, 5, <https://undocs.org/A/73/301>.

Methodology



The research methodology and data collection for this report was approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee.¹⁶ This approval ensures that the research complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.¹⁷

This report utilises a qualitative research methodology. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with current and former MPs, election candidates, and political staffers, primarily from the Australian Labor Party (ALP). The interviews allowed participants to carry forward the conversation to what was important to them. Participants were asked about their experiences of harassment while working in politics, and how such experiences had impacted their career and personal wellbeing. The interviews were undertaken with underlying feminist principles of qualitative research.¹⁸

An anonymous online survey of women with experience in politics was also conducted. The survey was open to women participating in local, state, and federal levels of politics, across different political parties. The survey focussed on the prevalence of different forms of harassment faced by women in politics. It asked participants about their confidence and knowledge about reporting mechanisms. Most importantly, the survey provided a space for women to share their experiences anonymously. While the sample size of the survey is small (N=30), women wrote lengthy and valuable statements about their experiences. As women across party lines participated in the survey, the findings and recommendations of this report provide valuable advice to all political parties. Experiences of abuse and harassment are widespread and not limited to a single political party.

The report draws upon comparative analysis of the UK Parliament and its approach to addressing abuse and harassment in politics. The UK is used as a primary case study because of its comparable parliamentary system and similar party structure. Since Jo Cox's murder and the exposure of sexual harassment within Westminster, there has been a consolidated effort to stop abuse in politics. This has resulted in comprehensive inquiries and the establishment of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme in the UK Parliament.¹⁹ There are also several organisations working to improve women's representation and experience in politics, which were consulted in the development of this report. While no country has been able to stop violence against women in politics, the UK's recent steps forwards provide valuable lessons for Australia.

16 ANU Human Research Ethics Committee Protocol 2020/148

17 National Health and Medical Research Council, "National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (Updated 2018)" (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018), <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018>.

18 M Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry: From Political Conviction to Methodological Innovation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); S.N. Hesse-Biber and P Leavy, "Introduction: Pushing on the Methodological Boundaries: The Growing Need for Emergent Methods within and across the Disciplines," in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, ed. S.N. Hesse-Biber and P Leavy (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 1–15; Maureen C. McHugh, "Feminist Qualitative Research: Towards Transformation of Science and Society," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (Cary, US: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014).

19 Laura Cox, "The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff - Independent Inquiry Report," October 15, 2018, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/conduct-in-parliament/dame-laura-cox-independent-inquiry-report.pdf>; Naomi Ellenbogone, "An Independent Inquiry into Bullying and Harassment in the House of Lords," 2019, <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/house-of-lords-commission/2017-19/ellenbogen-report.pdf>; Gemma White, "Bullying and Harassment of MPs' Parliamentary Staff Independent Inquiry Report," 2019, https://www.parliament.uk/documents/Conduct%20in%20Parliament/GWQC%20Inquiry%20Report%2011%20July%202019_.pdf.

6

Diversity and intersectionality

Though gender was the overarching frame of this report, entrenching intersectionality in the methodology and data collection is essential. Intersectionality recognises that women can face discrimination on the basis of multiple and intersecting identities, which are not limited to gender. This includes, but is not limited to, gender identity, race, disability, class, sexuality and religion. Often, these intersecting identities are discussed as footnote, but the report seeks to bring forward the experiences of diverse women.

In aiming to centre intersectionality, the report has focused on culturally and linguistically diverse, or racially diverse, backgrounds. This builds on the 2019 Julia Gillard Next Generation Internship Report by Stephanie Milione, which studied ways to increase the representation of Indigenous and culturally diverse women in Australian politics.²⁰ Half of the interview participants and 25 per cent of the survey respondent identified as being Indigenous or having a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Notions of intersectionality are included in the analysis throughout this report.

In Australian parliaments and political parties, people of other intersecting identities, such as disability and gender identity, are significantly underrepresented. Reflecting this dearth, there were limited respondents from these minority groups. It is critical that future research on abuse and harassment in politics builds on this report to include other underrepresented, intersectional identities.

²⁰ Stephanie Milione, "A Truly Representative Democracy: Increasing the Representation of Indigenous and Culturally Diverse Women in Australian Politics," Julia Gillard Next Generation Internship (EMILY's List Australia, 2019), https://www.emilyslist.org.au/jgngi_report_2019.

PART I

Women and girls interested in politics

The first step towards gender equality in political leadership begins long before women run for election. It starts when girls and young women develop an interest in politics and begin to see themselves as people who can make a valuable contribution to Australian society. This takes place within the home, and continues through school and the workplace. Nurturing interest and engagement in politics amongst girls, is essential for ensuring that there is a large cohort of competent young women ready to run for public office in the future.

There continues to be a divide between political ambitions and leadership aspirations among young women and men in Australia.²¹ Negative perceptions of politics in Australia leads girls and young women to self-select themselves out of careers in politics. Further, the recent exposure of abuse and harassment faced by women at all levels of politics is likely to have further discouraged girls from entering politics. This poses long term consequences for the progress of women's leadership in Australia. However, there is opportunity to improve how political organisations engage with young women to encourage them to keep their political aspirations alive.

²¹ Hayley Cull and Jennifer Gardner, "The Dream Gap: How Gendered Political Culture Affects Girls and Young Women," in *Gender Politics: Navigating Political Leadership in Australia*, ed. Zareh Ghazarian and Katrina Lee-Koo (Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press, 2021).

The gender gap in political ambition persists

In most countries, it is more common for young men to have actively considered a career in politics than young women.²² In the United States, there is a 15 per cent gap between young men and women who have considered becoming a political candidates.²³ Furthermore, women are less likely to consider themselves qualified to be in public office compared to men with the same experience and credentials.²⁴ The gendered political socialisation of girls and boys creates a stark gap in political ambition.²⁵ How children are encouraged by their parents, learn at schools, and participate in competitive activities, influences the development of the self-confidence needed to embolden young people to run for public office. However, at each of these stages of political socialisation, girls and young women are at a disadvantage.²⁶

The persistence of the gender gap in political ambition poses a significant challenge to ensuring the progress of women's leadership in Australia. While there is initially a strong desire amongst girls to lead and become involved in politics, their ambition fades as they grow into young women. Girls and young women continue to believe that politics does not have a place for them. They consider that women struggle to have careers in politics if they have families, and that women parliamentarians face undue scrutiny and hostility from male colleagues and the mainstream media. As a result, young women and girls believe they will have a damaging experience in politics because of their gender.²⁷ The negative perception that young women hold of politics in Australia leads many to opt out of careers in politics.

Research by Plan International conducted in 2017 highlights the gap in political ambition amongst young men and women in Australia.²⁸ Only 2 per cent of girls aged 10–14 years and 5 per cent of girls aged 15–17 years listed politics as a future career option. Alarming, the research suggests that almost no young women aged 18–25 considered politics as a possible career.²⁹ Furthermore, there are significant differences between young women and men in their perceptions of gender and politics. One in three girls (35 per cent) viewed their gender as an obstacle to becoming a politician, compared to one in 25 boys (4 per cent).³⁰ The results of the Plan International surveys in Australia are shown in Figure 1.

Plan International similarly conducted a large study involving 10,000 girls from 19 different countries, finding that the negative perceptions of politics amongst young women and girls in Australia mirrors that around the world. Nine of ten girls surveyed as part of the study felt that they would experience discrimination and harassment if they occupied a position of leadership in the future. This perception was strongest among girls with some experience of leadership itself.³¹

22 Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless, "Entering the Arena? Gender and the Decision to Run for Office," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 2 (2004): 264–80; Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *Girls Just Wanna Not Run: The Gender Gap in Young Americans' Political Ambition* (Washington, DC: American University, 2013).

23 Lawless and Fox, *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*.

24 Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

25 Angela L. Bos et al., "100 Years of Suffrage and Girls Still Struggle to Find Their 'Fit' in Politics," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53, no. 3 (July 2020): 474–78.

26 Richard Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless, "Uncovering the Origins of the Gender Gap in Political Ambition," *The American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (2014): 499–519.

27 Cull and Gardner, "The Dream Gap: How Gendered Political Culture Affects Girls and Young Women."

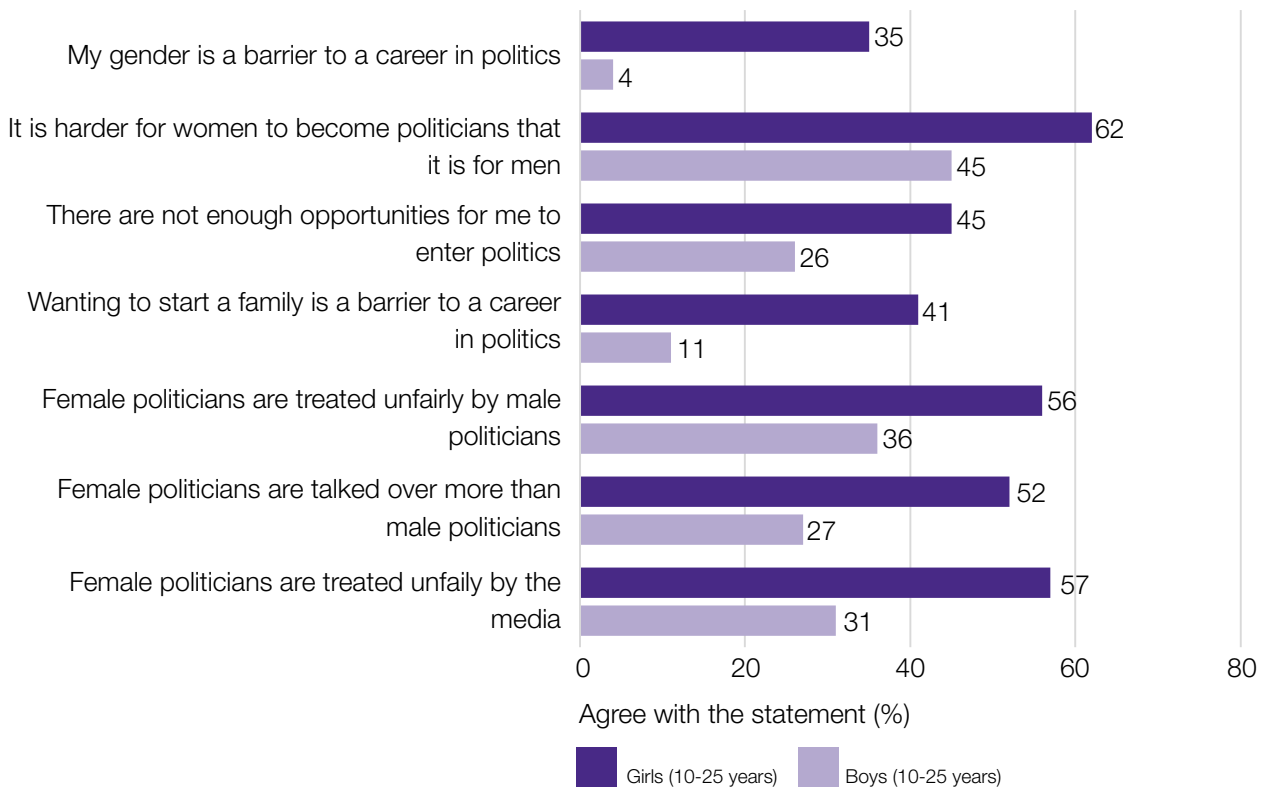
28 Plan International, "She Can Lead: Young People in Australia Share Their Views on Women and Politics in Leadership" (Plan International Australia, 2017), <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/she-can-lead/>; Plan International, "The Dream Gap: Australian Girls' Views on Inequality" (Plan International Australia, 2017), <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-10/apo-nid113711.pdf>.

29 Cull and Gardner, "The Dream Gap: How Gendered Political Culture Affects Girls and Young Women," 89.

30 Cull and Gardner, 89.

31 Cull and Gardner, "The Dream Gap: How Gendered Political Culture Affects Girls and Young Women."

FIGURE 1: Plan International Australia survey – Differences in attitudes towards gender and politics between girls and boys



Violence against women in politics further discourages girls from entering political careers

The recent exposure of violence against women in politics has worsened the reputation of politics in Australia. It has exposed political workplaces as unsafe for girls and young women. Early signs indicate that it has further discouraged girls and women from pursuing a career in politics. This presents a pressing challenge for women's leadership and representation in Australia, as it inevitably shrinks the pool of young women willing to enter politics.

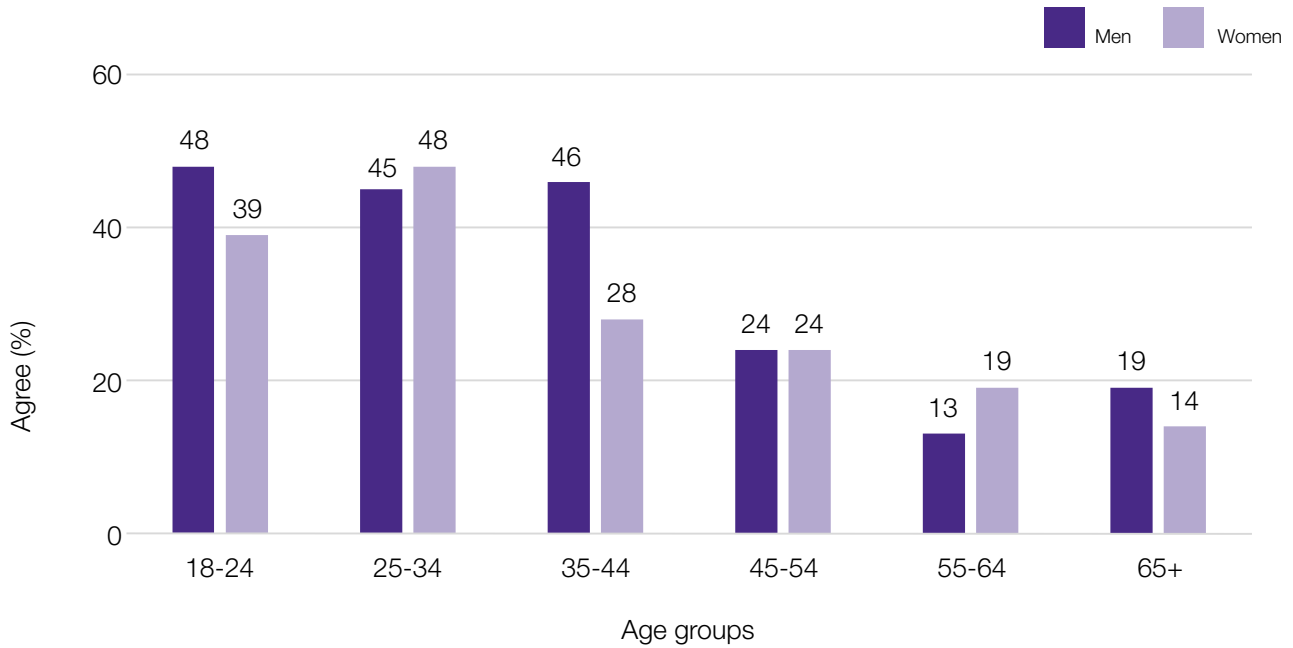
This challenge is growing in all countries where violence against women in politics is recognised. In the UK, a report by the Fawcett Society found that the revelations of sexual harassment in Westminster has negatively affected political participation.³² In total, 29 per cent of those surveyed had reported that accusations of sexual harassment in politics made them less likely to get involved in politics.³³ The negative effect on young women was even greater, with 39 per cent of 18–24 year olds and 48 per cent of 25–34 year olds reporting that stories of sexual harassment had decreased their interest in becoming politically active.³⁴ The results of the Fawcett Society survey are shown in Figure 2.

³² Leah Culhane, "Sexual Harassment in Parliament: Protecting MPs, Peers, Volunteers and Staff" (The Fawcett Society, 2019).

³³ Number of survey respondent was 2,056.

³⁴ Culhane, "Sexual Harassment in Parliament: Protecting MPs, Peers, Volunteers and Staff," 25–26.

FIGURE 2: Fawcett Society UK survey – ‘Accusations of sexual harassment in politics makes me less likely to get involved in politics’



One MP interviewed highlighted the challenge that the exposure of abuse and harassment has created in maintaining political ambition amongst young women in Australia. *“I really passionately want to attract idealistic, competent, feminists into parliament. I think if you were an idealistic person doing well in your chosen career, you would think ‘I’ll try to make the jump into politics’. Now, you’d look at what has been happening over the last six months and really think twice about it.”* Similarly, survey respondents noted the hesitation that young women feel about entering politics. *“I am aware of the kind of harassment/abuse that often happens in politics. Awareness of this kind of treatment does impact negatively on my view of a career in politics, and makes me more hesitant about pursuing such a career, despite my interest in politics.”*

The focus on violence against women in politics comes at a time when the treatment of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is in close living memory for young women in Australia. The misogynistic behaviour displayed toward the first woman Prime Minister of Australia, highlighted to young women the relentless sexism they are likely to face in high public office.³⁵ Young women interested in politics reported being hesitant to become more politically active and seek public office upon seeing the demeaning representation of Gillard in the mainstream media.³⁶ The recent exposure of abuse and harassment in political workplaces shows young people that there has been little improvement in how women are treated in politics since Gillard left office. As one MP interviewed explained, *“the same worry applies because people still have that at the back of their mind. They see story after story about sexual harassment and even sexual assault in Parliament House, as a workplace.”*

Young women now actively consider their safety and wellbeing before deciding to become active in politics. Increasingly, the public views political workplaces with trepidation. When young women indicate their interest in working in politics, their family and friends express real concern for their safety. One interview participant described her conversations with young women in Parliament House. *“I have actually had young women say to*

35 Anne Summers, “Her Rights at Work: The Political Persecution of Australia’s First Female Prime Minister,” *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 23, no. 4 (2012): 115–26.

36 Shepherd, “Gillard ‘treatment’ a Political Turnoff.”

me, 'I was so excited when I got offered a job as a staffer. My parents said to me 'Why would you go and work there? It is not safe.' I had a journalist say to me she'd reached the best job of her career. She was going to go work in the Canberra Press Gallery. Her parents said to her, 'Is it safe do you think?' It is just terrible."

Concern from family and friends is likely to further reduce young women's political ambition. The fear of being exposed to violence is central in the minds of young women and girls interested in politics, and also for those who care for and support them. When expressing an interest in public office, it is not uncommon to be asked, 'Why would you put yourself through that?' Violence against women in politics has created an additional burden on young women interested in politics, who now weigh up the risk to their safety before becoming more active and engaged in politics. Whether this be through joining political parties, seeking employment in political workplaces, or considering running for public office, young women are cautious of such engagement.

For culturally and linguistically diverse young women, the decision to enter politics whilst considering the risk of harm and cost appears to be more weighted. The challenge to strengthen political ambition amongst such women is even steeper as they have fewer role models they can look up to in positions of political leadership.³⁷ As participant in this study described, "for women of colour especially, we don't have expectations of being in Parliament handed to us. We don't imagine ourselves in that way when we are young." The perception of the exclusionary culture of politics further drive young women from minority groups away from political careers. Interview participants noted that diverse women need to be 'exceptional' candidates to be noticed and supported by political parties – "the system will open up to you and see you if you are an extraordinary woman of colour. If you are not an extraordinary woman of colour it won't see you at all."

As a result of the need to be exceptional candidates, culturally and linguistically diverse women are likely to have successful careers outside of politics or before becoming active within a political party. They are wary of giving up these trajectories to take a gamble on public office or a career in politics. Furthermore, diverse women are conscious that if they become politically active and develop a public profile, they will face the added burden of racialised abuse. The costs of politics for diverse young women grows increasingly heavy when the additional harm of abuse is considered. In this way, violence against women in politics works to deter diverse young women and girls from becoming politically active to an even greater extent than people without such intersecting identities.

The exposure of abuse and harassment in politics has led some senior women to hesitate when encouraging young women in their political careers. Women with experience in politics often mentor and encourage younger women who are starting out. However, these mentors now face the question of whether their encouragement is well placed. Senior women are hesitant to encourage young women into a career where they consider there is a substantial risk of harm. As one interview participant noted, "I find it really hard at the moment with what is going on with the Brittany Higgins story to be able to say those things I used to say. Which is, 'it is a really honourable role to be a member of parliament. We need more really good female leaders. You should really consider stepping up. I would be happy to mentor you.' All of those sorts of things I used to say in a positive way to young emerging female leaders. I just find it hard to say at the moment because of the nature of where things are at for women."

The absence of young women who were once interested in politics and could have been political leaders is one of the substantial, long-term, consequences of violence against women in politics. "I have no doubt that the darker, sadder losses to our national story and our national wellbeing are that it has stopped a lot of women from doing what they want or living up to their capacity. That is the great challenge – how to keep all those who are motivated and to bring back those who are discouraged." Significant work needs to be done to repair the perception of politics as a workplace in Australia. Young women and girls need to be shown that a career in politics and public life is where they belong.

³⁷ Cull and Gardner, "The Dream Gap: How Gendered Political Culture Affects Girls and Young Women," 89.

The focus on women's experience in politics has galvanised action for gender equality

As a counter to the negative impact on women's participation in the political process, the revelations of abuse and harassment faced by women in politics have sparked a national conversation on gender equality. The *March 4 Justice* protests held earlier this year saw more than 110,000 people come together, calling for an end to sexual harassment and abuse. This highlighted widespread public outrage at the persistence of violence against women in workplaces and in the community. This has generated further investigation of the issues and resulted in a flurry of recent topical publications and broadcasts.³⁸ As a consequence of this intense scrutiny there is a renewed focus on political leaders in Australia and their seeming inability to address the concerns of women.³⁹ The treatment of women in public life is definitely an issue that will not subside quietly.

The outrage at abuse and harassment of women in politics has emboldened people to act, recognising that they need to be involved in politics to make the change. Being spurred into action, in fact, is part of a long tradition of women in politics in Australia, despite its hostile environment. As one MP explained, she was motivated to become politically active as a young woman in order to stop persistent efforts by legislators to impede abortion rights and women's choice. She noted that *"I have no doubt that, if I use my career as experience, gender inequality and discrimination has held women back and probably encouraged them out. I have no doubt that it has probably propelled others forward and kept them there."*

Movement for progress and change in gender equality within Australia have often begun on a wave of anger. For one first-term MP interviewed, politics' poor standing in the community was part of what motivated her to stand for election and speak out publicly about issues of harassment and abuse. Another MP interviewed explained that, *"for some who have experienced violence and harassment and discrimination – that is what drives them. To be here, to change the law. Susan Ryan didn't just dream up the Sex Discrimination Act and think that that was a good thing to do. It is from people's experience about what happened to them and that shapes the laws."*

The outrage around violence against women in politics can galvanise young women and girls into action. The injustice of continuing gender inequality in politics and society more broadly is what compels many women in politics to keep fighting. As one political candidate explained, it meant that she decided to take steps into politics with her eyes wide open. *"When I put myself up for preselection, I was cognisant that I would experience sexism. I saw that in some ways as part of the territory. That I would need to have a thick skin... If we let them intimidate us, then they win. We need to claim our rightful place."* She was indignant that women should be terrorised and harassed out of politics, and used this anger to fuel her purpose.

ELA and other organisations committed to gender equality should work together to continue to harness this powerful movement in calling out the culture of politics in Australia. Political parties should work to specifically target and attract girls and young women to become more engaged in politics. Due to the exposure of abuse and harassment in politics, young women and girls are at risk of becoming more discouraged from considering a career in politics. It is essential that disassociation with politics is transformed into a movement that can embolden young women into action. ELA, women's organisations, and political parties must seek to expand their membership base amongst younger women, with an emphasis on nurturing their leadership ambition.

38 Annabel Crabb and Stamatia Maroupas, "Ms Represented with Annabel Crabb," 2021, <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/ms-represented-with-annabel-crabb>; Kate Ellis, *Sex, Lies and Question Time: Why the Successes and Struggles of Women in Australia's Parliament Matter to Us All* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2021); Julia Banks, *Power Play: Breaking through Bias, Barriers and Boys' Clubs* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2021); Kate Thwaites and Jenny Macklin, *Enough Is Enough*, In the National Interest (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2021).

39 Margo Kingston, "Across Australia, Women Are Calling the Prime Minister's Bluff," *The Canberra Times*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7192967/across-australia-women-are-calling-the-prime-ministers-bluff/>.

It is important that young women and girls have exposure to what the role of political leaders and members of parliament involves. This can be done by promoting and supporting internships and workplace learning opportunities for young women in parliamentary and campaign offices. Girls in secondary school should be encouraged to undertake their work experience placement with a member of parliament.

Organisations like Jasiri Australia offer a good example of programs that can break down barriers for girls and increase their interest in politics. Their program *Girls Takeover Parliament* is an incubator where girls get to experience participating in parliament. They are partnered with a MP and get to ‘takeover’ their office, writing speeches, discussing policy, and meeting other political leaders. The program has had a dramatic impact on the political engagement of girls. Prior to undertaking the program, less than 20 per cent of participants reported they wanted to be in politics. Upon completion, this jumped to 95 per cent.⁴⁰

All parliamentarians should participate in Jasiri Australia’s *Girls Takeover Parliament*. ELA can engage with Jasiri Australia by encouraging its endorsed MPs to participate in the program. Through this pathway, it can encourage involvement and grow its membership amongst girls and young women. The success of Jasiri Australia is an example to other countries facing the similar challenges of closing the gap in political ambition between boys and girls.

Engaging girls and young women in politics does not necessarily mean that they all need to be attracted as candidates for public office. Young women should be shown that there are a range of ways to become politically involved and contribute to community in Australia. Studies in the US have found that when politics is framed as the pursuit of communal goals, without an emphasis on individual power, young women become more interested in politics and see it as a potential career.⁴¹ Young women and girls can be attracted to politics by the opportunity to contribute to social movements and collective action initiatives currently undertaken by political organisations. Building on existing collective action initiatives, ELA can lead this work by actively encouraging young women to join the ELA Action Groups in each state and territory.

Another obstacle to young women’s engagement in politics is how political leadership is framed to them. Research by Plan International found that girls do not think they have the qualities of a leader. Most young women described leaders as confident, brave, and ambitious, yet fewer believed that they themselves had these traits.⁴² This raises important questions about how political leadership is framed to young women and girls. ELA and other women’s organisations can work to show young women they already hold the diverse qualities needed to be an effective leader.

In the UK, the Equal Power campaign is a valuable example of a program which attracts women from diverse backgrounds into politics by emphasising that they already hold the personal qualities needed in political leadership.⁴³ The Equal Power campaign is run by a coalition of women’s organisations, including the Fawcett Society, Centenary Action Group, Citizens UK, Elect Her, 50:50 Parliament, Glitch, and The Muslim Women’s Network UK. The purpose of the campaign is to attract and train women to get elected as MPs and councillors, and lead change with their local communities. It particularly seeks women from underrepresented groups across politics, including culturally diverse and disabled women.

40 Jasiri Australia, “Girls Takeover Parliament,” Jasiri Australia, 2021, <https://jasiri.org.au/girls-takeover-parliament>.

41 Monica C. Schneider et al., “Power, Conflict, and Community: How Gendered Views of Political Power Influence Women’s Political Ambition,” *Political Psychology* 37, no. 4 (2016): 515–31.

42 Plan International, “She Can Lead: Young People in Australia Share Their Views on Women and Politics in Leadership.”

43 Fawcett Society, “Equal Power,” The Fawcett Society, 2021, <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/equal-power>.

The Equal Power campaign is successful at gaining interest from women with no background in politics, because it communicates to women that they have the personal backgrounds which need to be better represented in politics. This recognises their diverse leadership qualities as a much-needed strength. The Equal Power campaign's powerful messaging is centred on being part of a movement to transform politics and policy in the UK. It inspires women to think of themselves as people who belong in politics, through workshops such as *'What does my political future look like?'* and *'Politics makes a great second career'*. Equal Power also includes training on practical skills to enter politics, as well as workshops to alleviate the concerns that women have about being in public life. This includes workshops on online abuse and campaigning.

The Equal Power campaign provides an important example to women's organisation and political organisations in Australia of how to attract young, diverse women into politics and foster their political ambition. Critically, having a coalition of women's groups lead the Equal Power campaign means that training can draw on the strengths of each of the organisations. While there are several organisations working towards gender equality in Australia, there is room for greater collaboration between programs to improve women's political representation. ELA should explore working with other progressive women's organisations in Australia to attract more young and diverse women into politics, using the Equal Power campaign as a great example of a model.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 Young women and girls must be specifically targeted to become engaged in politics and nurture their political ambition. ELA, women's organisations, and political parties should seek to expand their membership bases amongst younger women.

1.2 Young women and girls need to have greater exposure to what the role of MPs entails. All parliamentarians should participate in Jasiri Australia's *Girls Takeover Parliament*. ELA can encourage its endorsed MPs to participate in the program. MPs should advertise internships and work experience placements in their parliamentary and electorate offices for girls and young women from their local community.

1.3 Young women and girls are attracted to politics by the opportunity to contribute to social movements and collective action initiatives currently undertaken by political organisations. Political parties should work to foster an inclusive environment for young women, and encourage them to get involved in campaigning. ELA can set an example and lead this work by actively encouraging young women to join the ELA Action Groups in each state and territory.

1.4 Young women and girls need to be shown that they already hold the personal qualities needed to be a political leader. ELA and other like-minded, progressive women's organisations can affirm this. Using the Equal Power campaign from the UK as a model, ELA should explore working with other women's organisations in Australia to attract more young women into politics. ELA should specifically build partnerships with progressive women's group which focus on diversity in leadership, so as to attract more underrepresented women into politics.

PART 2

Employees and volunteers

Girls and young women interested in politics often take their first steps into politics by volunteering for a political party, organisation or campaign, or through employment as a staffer. These positions are important stepping stones for women into leadership. It provides an insight into the work of parliamentarians. Employees and volunteers contribute to the development of policy, for example through providing advice to a Member of Parliament or by bringing an idea to action through a political party.⁴⁴ Critically, it is in this early stage of political work that women develop the professional networks which help them to run later as candidates.

In recent months, the abuse of political staffers has been at the centre of public attention. A toxic workplace culture has been revealed within Parliament House, which has allowed destructive behaviour to continue without consequences. People volunteering and working within political parties and other political organisations are vulnerable to abuse. Persecution has been witnessed at all levels of government, including local and state. Experiences of abuse significantly impact women's career decisions and affects their professional advancement. There is limited awareness of and confidence in reporting mechanisms, and there is a need to improve formal and informal support structures. Critically, employees and volunteers demand that reporting mechanisms should be transparent, confidential, and independent, should prompt resolutions, and should entail direct consequences for perpetrators.

44 Maria Maley, "The Policy Work of Australian Political Staff," *International Journal of Public Administration* 38, no. 1 (2015): 46–55.

Women experience abuse while working in politics

Employees and volunteers in politics work within ‘protected public spaces’ such as parliaments, as well as political parties and associations. While there is an expectation that public institutions and politics should be transparent and accountable, the experiences of employees and volunteers demonstrates that this is far from the case. These spaces have been dominated by a longstanding elite male power structure which has perpetuated the abuse of women working within them.⁴⁵

In Australia, a toxic boys club in Parliament House has been exposed, where bullying and harassment are commonplace.⁴⁶ This is not an issue unique to Australia. Recent independent inquiries of the New Zealand Parliament and both houses of the UK Parliament have similarly found that there is widespread bullying and harassment.⁴⁷ Women who work within these institutions, in parliamentary services and political offices, are targeted by intimidation and sexual harassment. It has been found that their professional opportunities and capacity to be political active are often limited as a result.

In the UK Parliament, the Working Group on an Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy conducted a survey of people employed in or with parliament. It found that 39 per cent of respondents reported experiencing bullying in the past year, whilst 19 per cent reported experiencing sexual harassment, including witnessing sexually inappropriate behaviour.⁴⁸ An independent inquiry into bullying and intimidation among House of Commons staff described sexual harassment within the organisation as insidious and pervasive.⁴⁹

The harassment and intimidation of women often occurs within their political party itself. The recent coverage of abuse by the *Labour Too* movement in the UK demonstrated the extent of the problem within political parties.⁵⁰ Led by women in the Labour Party, the *Labour Too* movement cried out against sexual harassment within the party and called for improvements to complaints handling processes.⁵¹ The behaviour that they reported ranged from inappropriate touching to rape. The *Labour Too* movement demonstrates that perpetrators of violence are not confined to political opponents. In many cases, it can be colleagues or peers who seek to target women through sexist methods for their own personal or career advantage.⁵²

45 NDI, “#NotTheCost Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics: Program Guidance” (National Democratic Institute, 2017), <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/not-the-cost-program-guidance-final.pdf>.

46 Banks, *Power Play: Breaking through Bias, Barriers and Boys’ Clubs*.

47 Debbie Francis, “Independent External Review into Bullying and Harassment in the New Zealand Parliamentary Workplace - Final Report,” 2019, <https://www.parliament.nz/en/visit-and-learn/how-parliament-works/office-of-the-speaker/corporate-documents/independent-external-review-into-bullying-and-harassment-in-the-new-zealand-parliamentary-workplace-final-report/>; Ellenbogone, “An Independent Inquiry into Bullying and Harassment in the House of Lords”; White, “Bullying and Harassment of MPs’ Parliamentary Staff Independent Inquiry Report.”

48 Working Group on an Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy, “Working Group on an Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy Report” (UK Parliament, February 8, 2018).

49 Cox, “The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff - Independent Inquiry Report.”

50 Krook, “Westminster Too.”

51 Huffington Global, “Labour Activists Urge Corbyn to Take Harassment Action,” *The Huffington Global*, February 28, 2018, <http://huffington-global.com/labour-activists-urge-corbyn-to-take-harassment-action/>.

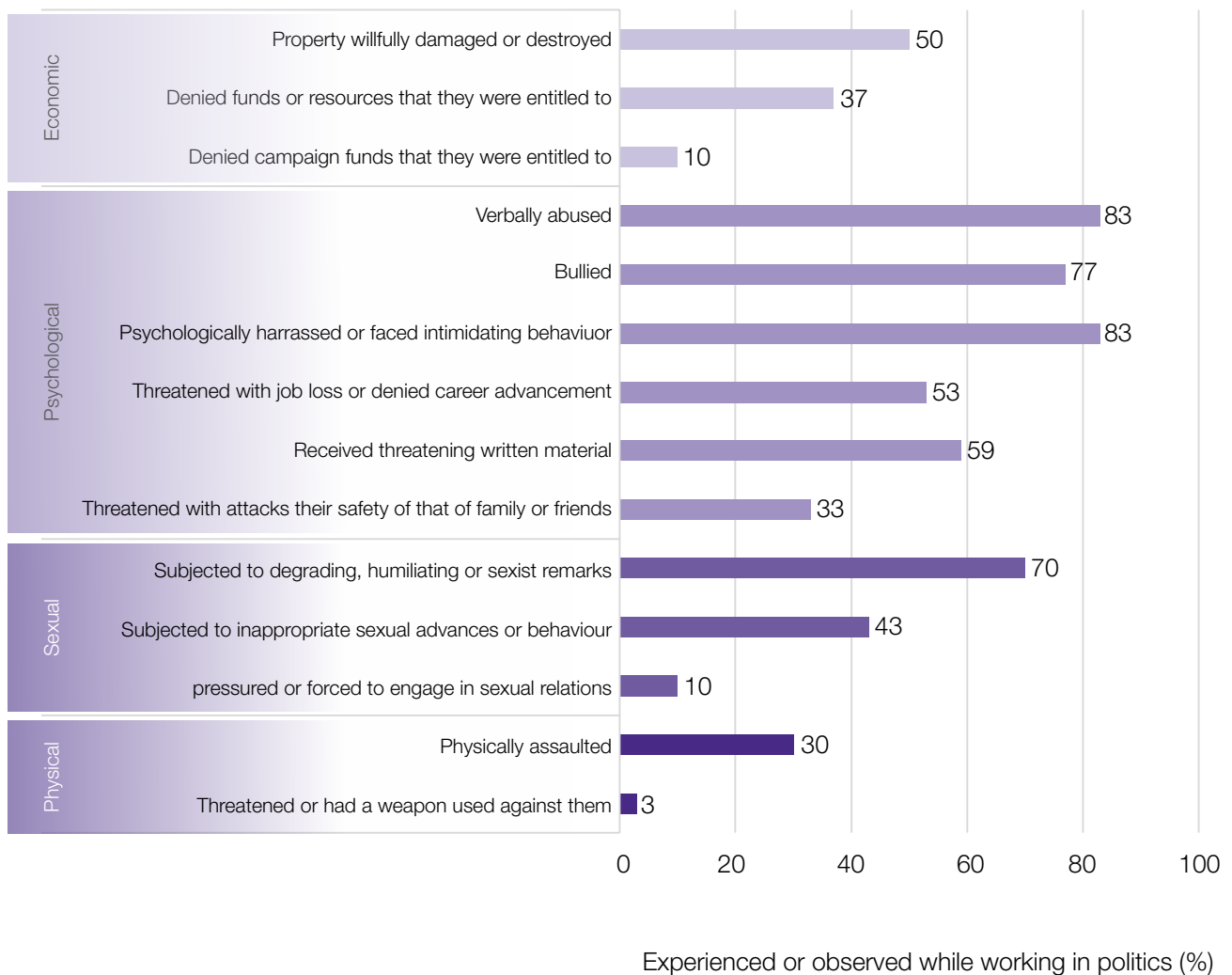
52 UN, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on Violence against Women in Politics.”

The results of the survey conducted as part of the JNGI Report demonstrate that the prevalence of abuse and harassment is high amongst employees and volunteers working in politics. Participants were asked if they have had experiences or witnessed someone else go through abuse and harassment in the course of their work. The survey was open to women of all political parties, participating in local, states, and federal levels of politics. The findings of this survey indicate that women across party lines experience economic, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse while working in politics. The results of the survey are shown in Figure 3.

Psychological abuse was the most common form of violence, with 83 per cent of respondents having experienced verbal abuse, harassment, and intimidating behaviour. Rates of bullying are also high, with 77 per cent disclosing that they had experienced such mistreatment. Rates of sexual harassment and abuse are concerning, with respondents reporting they had been subjected to degrading sexist remarks and inappropriate sexual advances at rates of 70 and 43 per cent, respectively. Alarming, 30 per cent of respondents had experienced physical assault in the course of their work in politics.

Across the spectrum, the harassment and abuse mostly occurred within the workplace, or at a work-related event. In most circumstances, the identity of the perpetrator was known to the respondent.

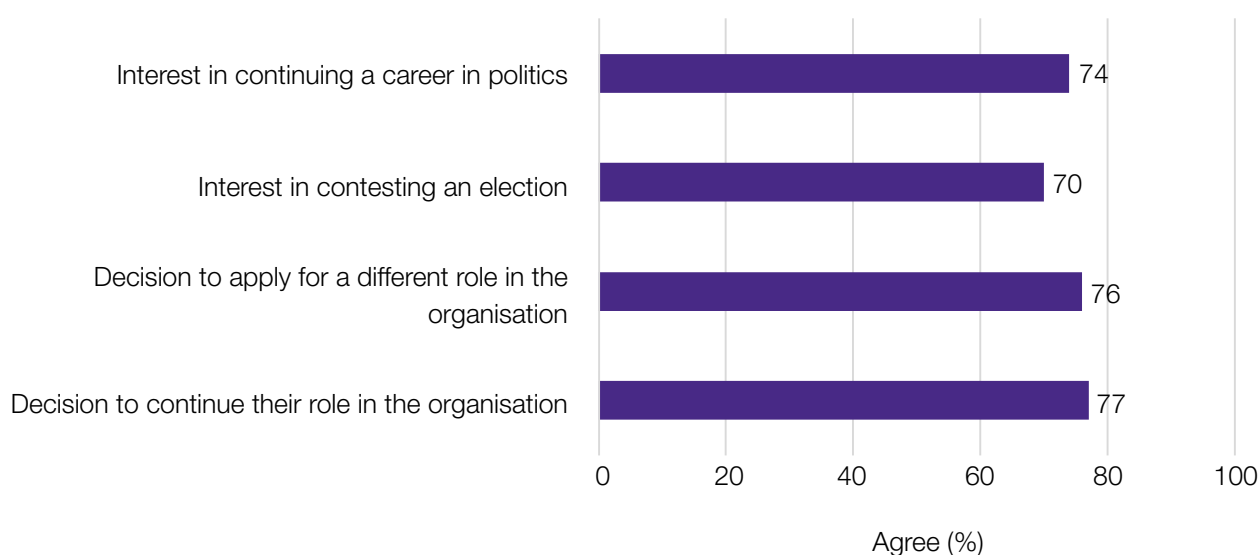
FIGURE 3: ELA JNGI survey – Prevalence of violence against women in politics



Experiences of abuse significantly limits women's career advancement

Critically, experiences of abuse and harassment significantly limit women's professional advancement in politics. Of the women this research surveyed, close to 3 out of 4 (74 per cent) noted that experiencing abuse and harassment in their work had impacted negatively upon their interest in continuing a career in politics. In terms of taking the next step into entering public office, 70 per cent of those surveyed said that abuse had dampened their motivation to contest an election. Most importantly, the overwhelming majority of women surveyed indicated that experiences of harassment had affected their decision to continue their role in the organisation or apply for a different role, at 77 and 76 per cent respectively.

FIGURE 4: ELA JGNGI survey – Impact of violence against women in politics on career progression



The women surveyed described in how abuse and harassment had impacted their career choices in their own words. For many, it had reduced their confidence and made them reconsider their place in their workplace. A common theme amongst the respondents' comments was that they had been subjected to multiple incidents of abuse. Over time the relentless nature of the harassment drove many away from their work in politics altogether. The following testimonies demonstrate the isolating and distressing impact of abuse, and how it leads women in politics to exit prematurely.



"I eventually left politics after years of witnessing bullying and harassment in the workplace – it wasn't worth it anymore."



"I no longer wanted to work in an environment where inappropriate behaviour was seen as acceptable, or sexual misconduct excused and condoned. I was also punished ('asked' to resign) for supporting an alleged victim of sexual assault/misconduct whose perpetrator was a colleague of mine."



“The impact of bullying, slander and psychological violence makes me want to stay far away from politics. I feel so upset and disillusioned by what I’ve experienced that I don’t think I’ll ever contest another election and have dramatically scaled back my involvement in the party and local politics.”

For women volunteering in election campaigns and involved in collective action, abuse and harassment has led them to leave their valuable work. As one respondent explained, *“verbal and physical harassment while working as a campaign volunteer gets very tiresome. After working on 10 years of campaigns the negatives start to outweigh the positives. I have withdrawn from political participation as a result of constant online and real-life abuse.”*

Experiencing or witnessing abuse and harassment discouraged women already working in political organisations from running for public office. The women surveyed for this study noted that it made them reconsider their political ambition and turn away from goals that they had once harboured. They also described how witnessing the harassment of candidates made them reappraise whether they were ‘tough enough’ to seek public office. As one respondent noted, *“I’ve had to really consider the potential impact on both me and my family and friends of running. The experiences of other women have really scared me, to be honest.”* Another respondent stated that, *“In considering a future role in public life, I have decided earlier I didn’t have a ‘tough enough skin’ to go through what I experienced other women enduring, both within the party structure and from the public and media.”*

Furthermore, experiences of persecution negatively impact women’s personal wellbeing. The women surveyed for this study described questioning their self-worth. They commonly experienced anxiety and depression, being scared and highly stressed after incidents of harassment. As one respondent described, *“it made me somewhat fearful, and caused me to ‘keep my head down’.”* Women reported taking leave and seeking psychological support services in response to their deteriorating personal wellbeing. The effect of abuse on personal health affected how women interacted with others at work. As one respondent described, *“I developed a lack of trust for male members of parliament and senior male colleagues.”*

Workplace conditions and culture in politics makes women vulnerable to abuse

Political workspaces, and in particular, Parliament House were described as *“the most unique workplace you will ever find.”* Unfortunately, workplace conditions and culture in political organisations create a system of vulnerability for employees and volunteers.

The employment arrangements of political staffers in Parliament House presents a complex structural issue, as MPs act as individual employers. Political staffers are employed directly by the parliamentarians they work for under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984* (Cth) (MoP(S) Act). However, administration support and human resource functions are provided by the Department of Finance. This includes the administration of payroll, maintaining the MoP(S) Workplace Bullying and Harassment Policy and administering reports and complaints, and the facilitation of workers compensation claims and incident reports.⁵³

⁵³ Stephanie Foster, “Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021), 7, <https://pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/review-parliamentary-workplace-responding-serious-incidents-final.pdf>.

However, the actual power of the Department of Finance and the extent to which it fulfils its human resources functions are limited. Subject to the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) and other relevant legislation and conditions of employment, parliamentarians have control over most staffing decisions.⁵⁴ Thus, ultimately, MPs hold power and control over the employment of staff. They are able to hire and fire staff with little explanation or accountability.

In the event that an MP is the perpetrator of abuse, there are limited places a junior person can go to resolve the issue without threatening their employment. As interview participants noted, *“the power imbalance is stark”* between MP and employees. *“If you’re a member that is abusing or harassing or not dealing with issues with staff, you can see how the easier option for staff would be to leave rather than pursue a complaint through.”* If there is an issue of abuse or harassment within an office, victims feel worried about the implications of raising it. They are concerned that they will not only have their employment terminated, but that their reputation could be tarnished by the MP who may hold considerable power within the political party and the broader community.

The hierarchical nature of politics intersects with power in a way that often limits the agency of women employees and volunteers. Aside from MPs, chiefs of staff and senior advisors exert considerable power and dominance within Parliament House. The interview participants in this study noted that abuse and harassment more often occur between staff within offices, rather than between members of parliament. Senior staff have influential roles and can be the ones who are able to champion and help others to succeed in their political careers. As a result, they are able to hold this power over more junior staff. As one interview participant noted, *“if you’ve got a powerful chief of staff and you’re a young person, you’re away from home and isolated. Away from your social networks. Away from your family. You could see how someone with ulterior motives could take advantage of that.”*

For junior people working in parliamentary offices and within political parties, their career progression can hinge upon support for senior colleagues. As one interviewee explained, *“in an organisation like ours, people’s progress through the organisation is based on rumour and reputation. For junior people the worry is that if you stand up for yourself against who is more senior, then you are endangering the next part of your career.”* The threat of being overlooked for opportunities or having your career progression threatened looms high for junior women in political organisations. Instead of standing up against harassment, the hierarchical nature of political structures incentivises them to endure the behaviour or risk their careers.

The impact of exclusion on junior women by more senior staff was also consistently raised by participants in this study. Whilst this is a more elusive element of gendered behaviour, it has consequences for workplace culture. As one interview participant noted: *“You know, the boys all go and make sure they are in the know and we know nothing. In a way it’s a more subtle and kind of meaner gendered behaviour, between it makes you second guess yourself all the time. Am I actually worthy of being at the table?”* Senior staff are the ones *“who can invite you to the meeting or not invite you, who can invite you to drinks or not invite you. Exclusion comes up a lot.”*

The conditions of working in Parliament House further create an environment where abuse and harassment is more likely to occur. There is often a need to work long hours and travel away from home during sitting weeks. This can lead to employees being isolated and away from their normal support networks, friends, and family. Individuals’ social networks and events can become centred on work. There is also the concern that if you do not participate in such social events that you will be excluded from building the networks that are needed for career progression.

The prominence of alcohol within Parliament House is an additional contributing factor to incidents of abuse and harassment. Alcohol is not the reason that abuse occurs, but it creates an environment that facilitates inappropriate behaviour. The Wednesday night culture of drinking and partying particularly affected the

⁵⁴ Foster, 7.

reputation of women working in politics. As one MP interviewed noted, “I was very aware of the Wednesday night culture. I would hear about the night before from staffers. I’d never hear about men. I would hear about women, who were seen in a certain light, in terms of who they were sleeping with. I remember when one of these women later ran as a candidate, that was how she was referred to internally.”

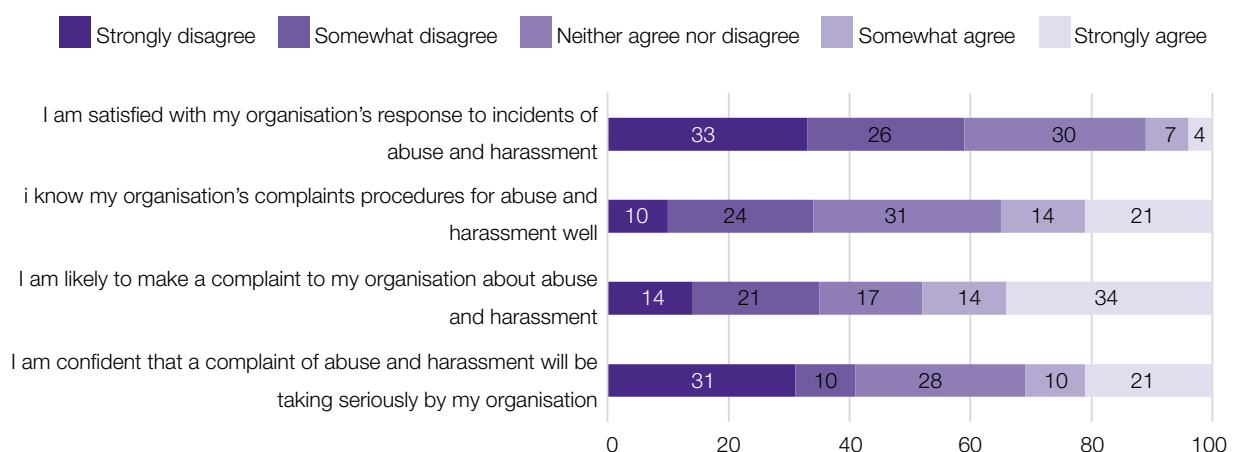
Outside of Parliament House and parliamentary offices, the effect of power and hierarchies continue in political parties. Harassment and abuse occur between members and volunteers within political parties. Former Victorian Labor President Hutch Hussein described the harassment taking place within ALP branches and Young Labor. She noted incidents of verbal abuse and intimidation. In one case, a man continually told a young woman “I own you” because he had introduced her to the ALP. When she gained an electorate office role, he demanded that she provide him with her earnings, and threatened harm to her professional reputation if she did not comply.⁵⁵

There is limited awareness and confidence in reporting mechanisms

Women working in politics in Australia are overwhelmingly unsatisfied with their organisations’ response to harassment and abuse. As shown in Figure 5, 59 per cent of those surveyed expressed that they were unsatisfied with organisational responses. Only 11 per cent of respondents said that they were satisfied. Furthermore, there is limited awareness of reporting mechanisms and complaints procedures. 34 per cent of respondents did not consider that they had good knowledge of their organisations’ complaints procedure.

Though almost half of the women surveyed (48 per cent) expressed that they were likely to make a complaint to their organisation about abuse and harassment, but were not confident that their complaint would be taken seriously. 41 per cent had little to no confidence at all that a complaint of harassment or abuse would be dealt with seriously by their organisation.

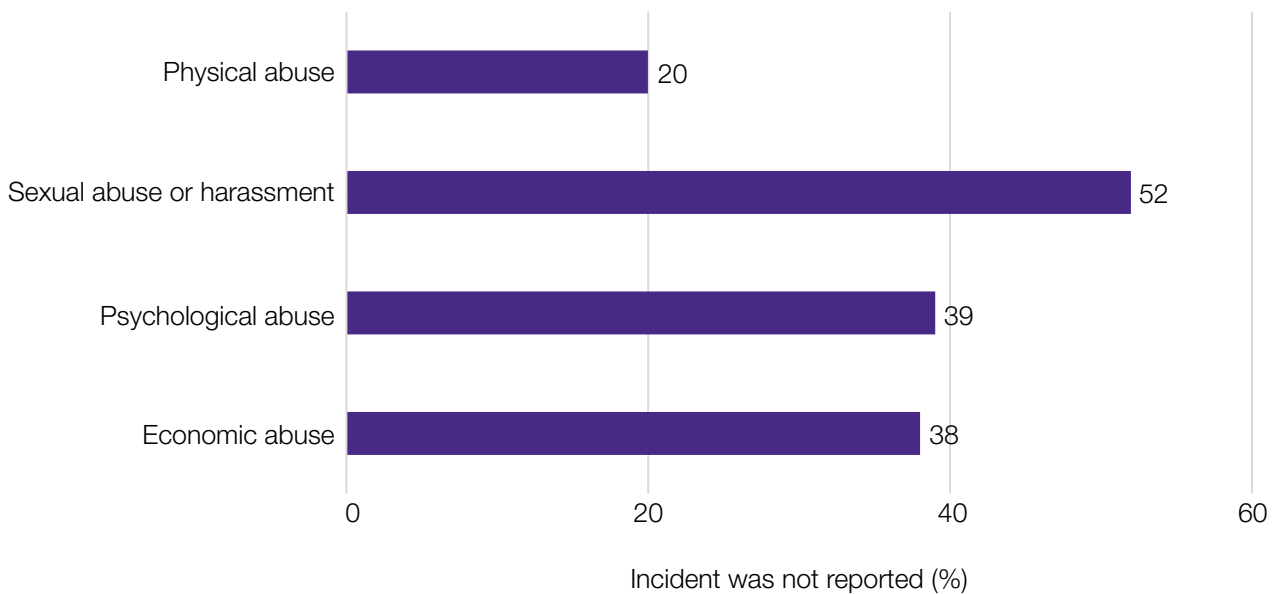
FIGURE 5: ELA JGNGI survey – Satisfaction, awareness and confidence in complaints procedures



⁵⁵ Sumeyya Ilanbey, “Labor State President Urges Members to ‘speak up’ about Harassment,” The Age, November 17, 2019, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/labor-state-president-urges-members-to-speak-up-about-harassment-20191117-p53bbr.html>.

Participants in this study were asked about whether they had reported incidents of abuse and harassment. If an incident was reported, it was usually to a person in the political party or their supervisor in their organisation. However, of those surveyed, a significant proportion did not report incidents of abuse and harassment to anyone after they occurred. This was particularly the case for sexual harassment and abuse. Over half of the women surveyed (52 per cent) who had experienced such assault did not report the incident to anyone.

FIGURE 6:
ELA JNGNI survey – Significant proportion of violence against women in politics is not reported



When asked about why they did not report the mistreatment they experienced, those surveyed highlighted that they feared being subjected to further abuse if they called it out. They were concerned about a potential career impact or damage to their reputation. They noticed an expectation that experiencing bullying and harassment is normal, and that the victims are the ones who need to endure it. *“I felt I had to toughen up because it was normal part of politics.”* Respondents also noted that they did not trust the reporting mechanism and were fearful of their report not being kept private. As one survey respondent noted, *“it is hard to know how it would come back to you.”*

Reporting mechanisms must be transparent, confidential, independent, and deliver prompt resolutions with direct consequences for perpetrators

There is strong demand that reporting mechanisms should be transparent, confidential, independent, and prompt in resolving the complaint. They should also result in serious and direct consequences for perpetrators.

Clear and publicised reporting mechanisms are critical. Women in this study raised the importance of all political organisations having specific policies and procedures in regard to abuse and harassment. Such policies should demonstrate organisations' commitment to stamping out discrimination. It should also show that the processes are transparent and how complaints will be resolved. Policies should be widely publicised to increase the awareness of employees and volunteers. As one survey respondent demanded, there should be *“clear processes for complaint resolution and obvious penalties for those found guilty of harassment. No more sweeping under the rug.”*

There is demand for complaints processes to be professional. Survey respondents noted that there need to be people specifically employed or engaged for whom addressing complaints of abuse or harassment is their core responsibility. Professionalism is particularly important in political organisations, which are built upon structures of hierarchy and power. Individuals with influence can be the perpetrators and are not necessarily best placed to handle complaints of abuse. One survey respondent highlighted this perception – *“independent investigators and assessors need to be brought in immediately. Political parties do not take action against their own people in positions of power and authority.”*

Survey respondents particularly noted the need for men to take action on this issue. Men need to be understand that abuse and harassment will not be tolerated and know there are consequences for such behaviour. They also need to be active allies, and should be specifically trained on how to call out inappropriate behaviour. Within the Parliament and across political parties, training programs for men should be established which focus on appropriate behaviour and being an active bystander.

Above all, the demand for consequences for perpetrators of abuse and harassment was strongest among interviewees and survey respondents. There is a real and significant perception that perpetrators are protected by people in positions in power. Often perpetrators of harassment are protected by senior members of the party and their mentors. This creates a culture of impunity.

There should be direct consequences for abuse and harassment. Within political parties, these should include expulsion and termination of party membership, and support if a complainant wishes to proceed with legal action. Having direct consequences for abuse shows that this behaviour is not tolerated. Combined with transparent and independent reporting mechanisms, it encourages victims to speak up about their experiences. As one interview participant explained, *“it is important to set and be explicit about the culture, and be explicit about consequences. It isn't about having a process no one would use, but having a policy that would actually have consequences for people's membership.”*

Participants in this study noted that, without consequences, particularly younger men within political parties felt that they could harass others without recourse. As one interview participant described, *“these were young men who saw futures for themselves. What had happened in the past is that those men went on to become members of parliament because their power was not challenged. There hadn’t been consequences and they had misused their power, the higher they got up.”*

In February, the ALP National Executive adopted a National Code of Conduct, which outlines expectations in behaviour for all party members, MPs, staff, and volunteers. The National Code of Conduct is accompanied with three policies: Sexual Harassment Prevention and Response, Bullying and Harassment Prevention and Response, and the Complaints Handling Policy.⁵⁶ The policies are a welcome response to the revelations of abuse and harassment in Parliament House.

Given that the survey included in this study was opened shortly after the adoption of the ALP National Code of Conduct, it is unlikely that the results reflect attitudes towards the policy. However, the demands of survey participants for reporting processes which are transparent, confidential, independent, prompt resolutions containing serious consequences for perpetrators, are critical principles for any reporting mechanisms. Once that National Code of Conduct and accompanying policies have been operationalised, the ALP will need to review its reporting mechanisms to ensure that it meets these essential principles and demands.

The reporting and complaints procedures covering employees and volunteers vary depending on the political party. Each party has its own set of procedures, if it has policies on misconduct at all.⁵⁷ Whilst it is important that political parties have their own sets of policies, this means that the rights and resources of those associated with political organisations who experience harassment are not uniform.

Victims of abuse may not trust political party processes to be confidential. It is therefore essential that an independent complaints process is established within Parliament House. Catherine Marriott’s experience with the National Party of Australia’s complaints process raises questions of privacy and fairness. After making a confidential complaint to the National Party about an incident of sexual harassment by Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, Marriott’s name was leaked. She described this as *“one of the most frightening things that you will ever have to live through... when you finally find the courage within yourself to stand up for what you believe in and then all control is taken away.”*⁵⁸

56 ALP, “National Platform,” 2021, <https://www.alp.org.au/about/national-platform/>.

57 Liberal Party of Australia, “National Code of Conduct” (The Liberal Party of Australia, 2019), <https://cdn.liberal.org.au/pdf/National%20Code%20of%20Conduct%202019.pdf>.

58 Georgie Dent, “‘It Was Unfair, Frightening & Horrific’: Catherine Marriott on Having Her Name Leaked,” *Women’s Agenda*, September 19, 2018, <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/it-was-unfair-frightening-horrific-catherine-marriott-on-having-her-name-leaked-by-the-national-party/>.

An independent complaints mechanism in Parliament House must promote confidence in its processes

An independent complaints body or process must be established within the Australian Parliament. Recently, there have been promising steps forward to do so, which follow other international examples.

In the UK, the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS) was established in July 2018. It provides a bullying and harassment complaints and reporting mechanism for MPs and their staff. The ICGS employs independent external experts to conduct investigations. The Commissioners for Standards, who are independent officers in both Houses of the UK Parliament, then assess and action the findings of these independent investigations. The Commissioners of Standards can demand an MP apologise to the House. If a more severe action is needed, the matter is referred to the Independent Expert Panel. The Independent Expert Panel does not include any MPs. It decides sanctions and hears appeals, which could include the suspension or expulsion of an MP. Sanctions of suspension or expulsion are put to a vote of the House of Commons.⁵⁹

In June 2021, the *Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents* by Stephanie Foster PSM ('the Foster Review') recommended that an independent complaints mechanism for serious incidents amongst the parliamentary workforce be established.⁶⁰ Serious incidents include assault, sexual assault and harassment, and systemic bullying and harassment. On 26 July 2021, the Australian Government accepted this recommendation and committed to operationalising the independent complaints mechanism by mid-September.⁶¹

The forthcoming *Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces* by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins ('the Jenkins Review'), will address the longer term cultural and systemic issues within Parliament House. The Jenkins Review is likely to inform the ongoing implementation and operation of the independent complaints mechanism.

The commitment to implement the recommendations of the Foster Review and establish the independent complaints mechanism constitutes an important step forward to improving the treatment of women in politics. It is however, a complex system that will be challenging to implement effectively. The independent complaints mechanism will be available to all parliamentary staff and parliamentarians. If a resolution is not reached locally, the full formal complaints process includes: a complaint to the Serious Incident Team (SIT), a workplace review conducted by an appointed independent expert, escalation to the Parliamentary Service commissioner, referral to the Presiding Officers of Parliament, and finally, the Parliament will determine necessary action.

The overarching challenge of implementing an effective independent complaints mechanism will be ensuring that it has the confidence of those working in Parliament House. While the proposed mechanism by the Foster Review has important checks and balances, it is essentially a scheme in which Parliament polices itself. The purpose of making Parliament the ultimate decision-making body intends to recognise the primacy and sovereignty of Parliament. Foster considers that 'expectations for conduct are rightly governed by the Parliament itself, and, as such, Parliament is the appropriate body to impose any consequences on parliamentarians in these circumstances.'⁶²

59 Richard Kelly, "Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme," Briefing Paper (House of Commons Library, April 27, 2021), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8369/CBP-8369.pdf>.

60 Foster, "Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents."

61 Prime Minister of Australia, "Foster Report," July 26, 2021, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/foster-report-0>.

62 Foster, "Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents," ⁶³.

However, public confidence in parliamentarians has significantly declined following the revelations of abuse and harassment in Parliament House. In fact, prior to these allegations coming forward, trust in politicians and government in Australia was already at an all-time low.⁶³ There is now an even stronger sense that Parliament is an institution which protects its own. Credible, serious, and unresolved allegations of sexual harassment and abuse have come forward against parliamentarians and even cabinet ministers. Yet, these very people are being supported to by their parliamentary colleagues to remain in public office. As one interview participant explained, *“why would anyone believe that, if you are junior staffer, making a complaint against a minister is ever going to resolve in you getting procedural fairness, let anyone justice?”*

To promote confidence in the scheme, it is essential that there is equal gender representation at each stage of the independent complaints mechanism in Parliament House. Under the proposed mechanism, Foster envisages that the Privileges Committee will address the most critical complaints where no prior resolution could be reached.⁶⁴ If a complaint is escalated to the Privileges Committee, the representation of women is very poor. In the House of Representatives Standing Committee of Privileges and Members’ Interests, there is only one woman out of 11 committee members (Anika Wells MP). The Senate Standing Committee of Privileges does not fare much better. There are only two women out of eight committee members (Senator Deborah O’Neill and Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells). Additionally, the presence of other minority groups is also limited. Ensuring greater gender representation in the decisions of influential Parliamentary committees will be essential to improving confidence in any independent complaints mechanism. To achieve this political parties need to be promoting candidates with all the diversity that is reflective to their communities.

The six-month and 18-month reviews of the UK ICGS following its implementation offer important lessons for the Australian Parliament as it seeks to establish its independent complaints mechanism.⁶⁵ Factors which have undermined the confidence of the ICGS include the length of time that investigation take, the perception that resolutions of complaints have not resulted in real consequences for perpetrators, and understandings that submitting a formal complaint would jeopardise the complainant’s employment.⁶⁶ From the survey conducted in this study, it is clear that the same concerns will apply in Australia. It is therefore essential that the principles found in this study are upheld and prioritised in the reporting mechanism’s establishment. As noted previously, any such mechanism must be transparent, confidential, independent, and result in a prompt resolution. It should have serious and direct consequences for perpetrators.

63 Sarah Cameron and Ian McAllister, “Trends in Australian Public Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study 1987-2019” (Australian National University, December 2019); Mark Evans, “Trust in Politicians and Government Is at an All-Time Low. The next Government Must Work to Fix That,” *The Conversation*, February 25, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/trust-in-politicians-and-government-is-at-an-all-time-low-the-next-government-must-work-to-fix-that-110886>.

64 Foster, “Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents,” 76.

65 Alison Stanley, “Independent Complaints & Grievance Scheme: Independent 18-Month Review,” February 22, 2021, https://www.parliament.uk/contentassets/e3ed0297d92a400bb249c887a30aa59b/icgs-18-month-review_final.pdf; Alison Stanley, “Independent 6-Month Review: UK Parliament Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme,” May 31, 2019, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/conduct-in-parliament/icgs-six-month-review---final-report.pdf/icgs-six-month-review---final-report.pdf>.

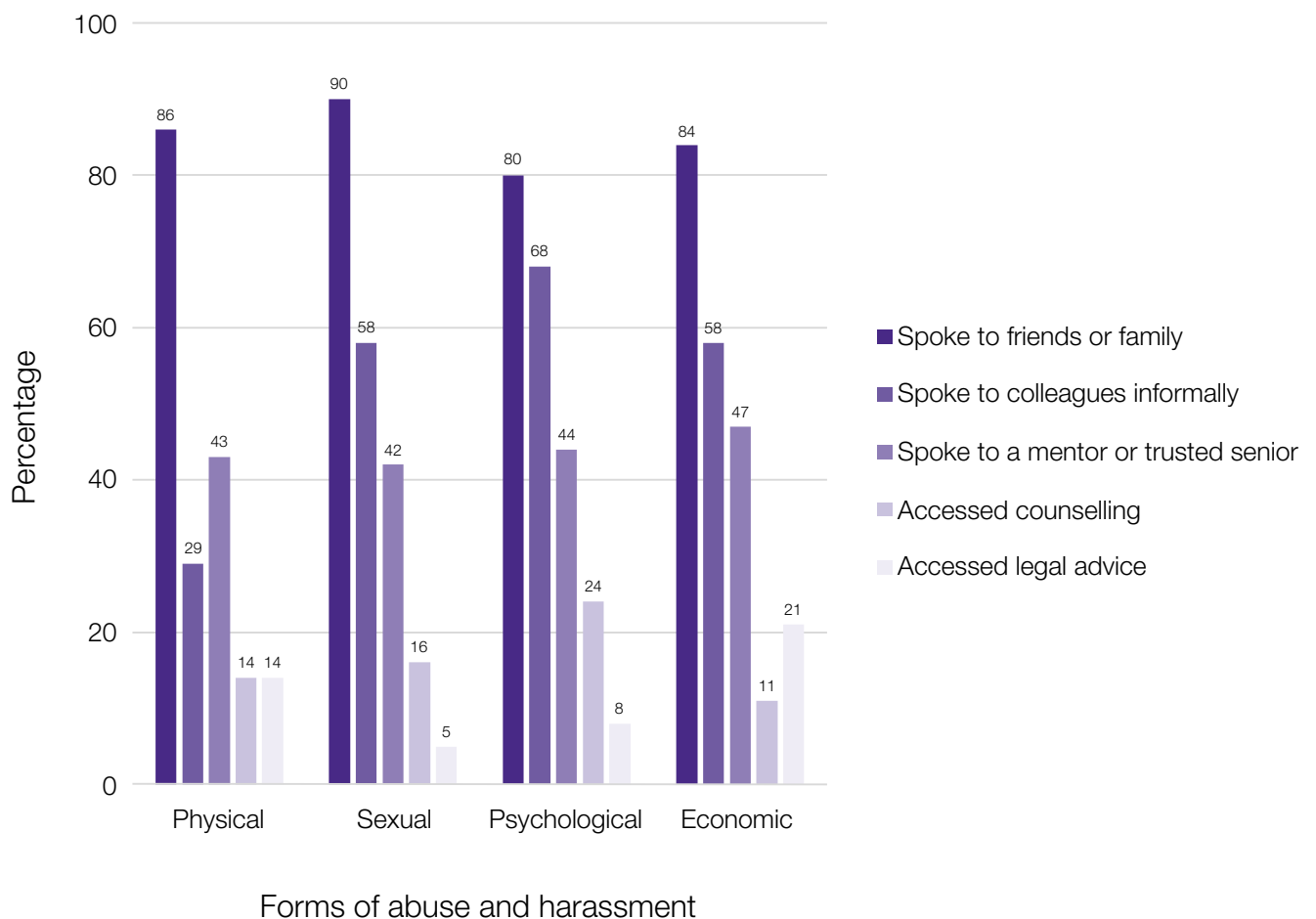
66 Stanley, “Independent Complaints & Grievance Scheme: Independent 18-Month Review,” 46–47.

Support structures and informal mechanisms should be strengthened

In addition to formal reporting processes, support structures for those who experience abuse and harassment are essential. In March this year, a Parliamentary Support Line (1800 APH SPT) was established. It operates nationally and is staffed at all times. It provides information, counselling, referrals to support services, and assistance in identifying complaints pathways. It is not clear, however, whether the Parliamentary Support Line is widely used, as the number of calls has not been published. This is important information that should be publicly released regularly.

From the survey conducted in this study, the most common sources of support for victims of abuse were, firstly, friends and family. Informal conversations with colleagues and mentors, or trusted seniors, then followed. The sources of support that women experiencing abuse and harassment seek are shown in Figure 7. In addition to those listed, respondents to the survey also noted that they spoke to their union, doctor, and political party.

FIGURE 7: ELA JGNGI survey – Sources of support for women experiencing violence in politics



Peer support amongst women within political organisations is an important protective feature. From the survey conducted, a large proportion of women reported speaking to their colleagues informally about experiences of abuse. If women feel that they have allies within their workplace who they can trust and access support from, they are less likely to leave the organisation or politics prematurely. All political parties should encourage women within their membership and caucus to develop professional and personal support networks.

ELA and other ALP networks, such as the Labor Women's Network and the Elizabeth Reid Network, demonstrate a good example of this work. They provide women with an opportunity to access a wider support network within their profession. It is important that regular planning events are conducted to encourage women to *"form friendships and alliances so that when things do get difficult there is a support structure for them."* ELA should continue its good work in holding regular planned events for women to develop nexuses of support, particularly through events with other ALP women's networks.

In addition, informal reporting mechanisms are also important ingredients to curb abusive behaviour. On average, 44 per cent of women reported speaking to a mentor or trusted senior about abuse and harassment they experienced. It is critical that there are female senior staff within political organisations and parliamentary offices that junior women can speak to if they notice concerning behaviour. This includes female chiefs of staff who are accessible and approachable, but have influence and authority within the organisation. Unfortunately, women in senior positions in parliamentary office are, yet again, underrepresented.⁶⁷

It is particularly important that there is also cultural and ethnic diversity within senior staff of political organisations and parliamentary office. Accessing peer support and informal mechanisms for culturally diverse women can be complicated. One participant in this study noted, *"if you're a person of colour and you know that the sexual harassment that you're experiencing is also because of that intersectionality, there's very few people you can talk to who get it."* Without diversity amongst senior staff, junior women can feel a doubled burden of isolation. They fear that their experience will not be recognised or that they will not be believed.

Establishing informal mechanisms and opportunities for early intervention is crucial. From the interviews conducted, it was continuously raised that action to mitigate concerning behaviour is not undertaken until a more serious incident occurs. Much like violence against women in the broader community, abuse in politics occurs on a continuum of actions and behaviours. It begins with sexist attitudes and remarks and extend to physical or sexual violence. When action is taken to curb concerning behaviour at an early stage, it is less likely to progress to a physical incident with long term harm to the victim. Building informal reporting mechanisms and support structures enable early intervention against violence against women in politics.

67 Marija Taflaga and Matthew Kerby, "Who Does What Work in a Ministerial Office: Politically Appointed Staff and the Descriptive Representation of Women in Australian Political Offices, 1979–2010," *Political Studies* 68, no. 2 (2020): 463–85.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Reporting mechanisms for abuse and harassment within political parties and political organisations must uphold the following essential principles: transparency, confidentiality, and independence. They must promptly resolve the complaint, and have direct consequences for perpetrators.

- 2.2 Political party codes of conduct should be widely publicised to increase awareness amongst employees and volunteers. The ALP can show leadership in this area by ensuring that existing members are aware and knowledgeable of the ALP National Code of Conduct and accompanying policies. These policies should be given to all new members upon joining the party.

- 2.3 Once the ALP National Code of Conduct and accompanying policies have been put into practice, the ALP will need to review its reporting mechanism to ensure that it meets the essential principles recognised in this report.

- 2.4 Within the Parliament and across political parties, training programs for men should be established which focus on appropriate behaviour and being an active bystander.

- 2.5 An independent complaints mechanism must be established within the Australian Parliament. The principles and practices highlighted in this report should be central to the mechanism, which must prioritise and proactively increase confidence in its processes.

- 2.6 To improve confidence, it is essential that there is equal gender representation at each stage of the independent complaints mechanism, and particularly within parliamentary bodies giving oversight (including the Privileges Committees).

- 2.7 The Australian Parliament should regularly publish information on the number of calls made to the Parliamentary Support Line, to ensure that the support mechanism is widely used.

- 2.8 Support structures and informal mechanisms should be strengthened in political parties and organisations. ELA can continue to lead this work through its regular planned events and joint events with other ALP women's networks. Through these events women will continue to develop professional and personal support communities.

- 2.9 Political parties should build informal reporting mechanisms and support structures to enable early intervention directed towards violence against women in politics. This includes having more senior female staff, and staff from other minority or intersecting identity groups, in parliamentary offices. They should be provided training and support, as they are likely to be the ones approached with informal reports.

PART 3

Candidates

After expressing an interest in politics, the next step towards public office is making the decision to run as a candidate. Nominating to contest an election as a candidate is a clear expression of interest in becoming a representative and leader in politics. Often, women who previously volunteered or worked for political parties or members of parliament nominate to be candidates for elections. However, the requirements to be a candidate are not exclusive. Successful candidates can come from different professional and personal backgrounds, far outside of political organisations.

Experiences of violence faced by candidates has a significant impact on their ability to be elected and their decision to stay in politics. During pre-selection contests, women who challenge favoured candidates face intimidation to discourage them from nominating. This intimidation, coercion and pressure often begins from members of their own political party. Then, once endorsed, candidates face harassment and abuse from the public. The violence is heightened for culturally and linguistically diverse candidates, as they often face added racist abuse.

Candidates face intimidation to dissuade them from running in pre-selection contests

Political parties endorse candidates for elections. This process by which a political party decides who will be its endorsed candidate is commonly known as ‘pre-selection’ in Australia. Pre-selection can be a highly competitive and challenging process. It is a high-stakes contest that involves personal, professional and factional ambitions.⁶⁸ It poses personal costs to individuals in terms of exposure and scrutiny, as well as being highly time consuming and potentially financially costly. While individuals can contest an election as an independent candidate, they cannot often compete with candidates who are supported by the resources offered through endorsement by a political party.⁶⁹

Pre-selection is the most important and overlooked step to achieving diversity and gender equality in representation in Australian politics. The candidates who political parties endorse shapes the choices laid before voters, the composition of parliament, and, critically, whose interests and voices are heard in policy debates and legislative outcomes.⁷⁰ Through their pre-selection process, political parties are gatekeepers to legislative office and political leadership. The actions of political party members and officials can either perpetuate current standards or improve gender representation in Australia.⁷¹

Despite the importance of pre-selection processes for representation, there is limited transparency at this step of the pathway to political leadership.⁷² In 1988, Gallagher and Marsh labelled candidate selection contests as the ‘secret garden of politics’ — a description which remains appropriate even today.⁷³ In Australia, political parties are not subject to any legislative regulation of their pre-selection processes. They are not required to disclose how pre-selection takes place, nor are they required to use a particular method.⁷⁴ This is because political parties are considered voluntary associations and their internal processes are deemed beyond the regulation of the state.⁷⁵

How then, do political parties select their candidates? The three main ways in which candidates are selected unfold through a vote of local party members, through a central party committee, or through a combination of the two methods.⁷⁶ However, the exact means and rules of pre-selection vary substantially both between and within political parties. The rules vary depending upon the level of government, upon whether the contest is for a lower house or upper house seat, upon the state, and upon the branch. The ALP and Liberal Party have 32 different sets of rules regarding candidate selection for national public office, and no two of these are identical.⁷⁷ No other parliamentary democracy around the world has so many varying rules controlling the pre-selection of candidates.⁷⁸

68 Anika Gauja and Marija Taflaga, “Candidates and Pre-Selection,” in *Morrison’s Miracle: The 2019 Australian Federal Election*, ed. Anika Gauja, Marian Sawyer, and Marian Simms (ANU Press, 2020), 71–89.

69 Anika Gauja and William Cross, “Research Note: The Influence of Party Candidate Selection Methods on Candidate Diversity,” *Representation* 51, no. 3 (2015): 287–98.

70 William Cross, “Democratic Norms and Party Candidate Selection: Taking Contextual Factors into Account,” *Party Politics* 14, no. 5 (2008): 596–619; Gauja and Taflaga, “Candidates and Pre-Selection.”

71 Narelle Miragliotta and Anika Gauja, “The Political Parties: The Gendered Politics of Preselection Processes,” in *Gender Politics: Navigating Political Leadership in Australia*, ed. Zareh Ghazarian and Katrina Lee-Koo (Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press, 2021).

72 Margaret Reynolds, “Women, Pre-Selection and Merit: Who Decides?,” POP 27 - Reinventing Political Institutions, Papers on Parliament (Senate, Parliament of Australia, 1996), <https://www.aph.gov.au/binaries/senate/pubs/pops/pop27/c03.pdf>.

73 Gauja and Taflaga, “Candidates and Pre-Selection”; Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh, eds., *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective: The Secret Garden of Politics*, (London: Sage Publications, 1988).

74 Gauja and Taflaga, “Candidates and Pre-Selection.”

75 Gauja and Cross, “Research Note.”

76 Miragliotta and Gauja, “The Political Parties: The Gendered Politics of Preselection Processes.”

77 William Cross and Anika Gauja, “Designing Candidate Selection Methods: Exploring Diversity in Australian Political Parties,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 1 (2014): 24.

78 Gauja and Cross, “Research Note.”

Although there are a great number of different rule of pre-selection, it is nevertheless relatively straightforward to obtain information on processes through party constitutions. However, understanding how the rules are applied in particular contests—and information on the contests themselves—is more difficult to uncover. Gauja and Taflaga found that of the 520 candidate selections which occurred in the 2019 Australian federal election, only 326 contests (63 per cent) were publicly reported. Even more concerning is that only 33 contests (6 per cent) across Australia were found to be a competitive pre-selection contest, or a contest with more than one candidate.⁷⁹

The intersection of violence against women in politics and brutal candidate experiences presents a murky picture of pre-selection processes. While the low number of competitive pre-selection contests can be partly explained by incumbents holding on to seats, this cannot account for all of the uncontested pre-selections. At the pre-selection stage, there is significant activity taking place within political parties that is not visible to the public, or even to political party members. Some of this activity borders on nefarious. In practice, the decision of who will be the endorsed candidate is determined by only a handful of people.⁸⁰ Yet, the wider representational consequences of this are influential for the progress of women's political leadership in Australia.

The rates at which women are selected as candidates varies between political parties in Australia. The Liberal Party uses a series of measure to increase the number of women candidates in pre-selection contests. This includes training seminars, assistance in developing campaign material, and mock presentations.⁸¹ In comparison, the ALP adopted the mandatory Affirmative Action rule for parliamentary seats in 1994. In 2002, the ALP raised the target to adopt mandatory pre-selection of women in 40 per cent of winnable seats. This quota will be raised to 50 per cent in 2025.⁸² The positive effect of the Affirmative Action rule in improving the standing and representation of women in the ALP should not be understated.

However, what happens in the margins of pre-selection contests raises questions about the treatment of women in politics. Women candidates who participated in this study reported experiencing intimidation and bullying to discourage them from contesting in internal party positions elections and pre-selection contests. The coercive, threatening tactics were undertaken by other candidates, their supporters, and factional powerbrokers.

Women candidates experience intimidation when they challenge factional division of seats or favoured candidates in pre-selections. One interviewee described the meetings that factional powerbrokers undertake while carving and mapping out seats. *“Predominantly men will sit around and say, ‘this person will be in this seat for 20 years and then I want this person to take over, they’re my person’. Or, ‘this person is going to retire in the next five years, this is who I want to take the seat’.*” There is an emphasis on choosing candidates who have ‘earned’ their role and done a lot for the party. However, multiple interviewees noted that such candidates are also supported because they are easily influenced and even controlled by their mentors. This reflects the cartelisation of political parties in Australia today.⁸³

When women upset the fixed outcome of a pre-selection process by nominating as a candidate, this is when intimidating scare tactics begin. Such measures includes pressure to withdraw their nomination, threats of isolation and backlisting within the party. *“When someone comes up out the blue, it threatens these predetermined outcomes. Because egos are on the line, and it has been done this way for a long time, people just use these intimidation tactics. They feel like they can justify that as politics. But it is very macho style of factional politics.”*

79 Gauja and Taflaga, “Candidates and Pre-Selection.”

80 Gauja and Taflaga.

81 Miragliotta and Gauja, “The Political Parties: The Gendered Politics of Preselection Processes.”

82 Australian Labor Party, “ALP National Constitution,” December 18, 2018, https://www.alp.org.au/media/1574/alp_national_constitution.pdf.

83 Narelle Miragliotta and Wayne Errington, “Legislative Recruitment and Models of Party Organisation: Evidence from Australia,” *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 18, no. 1 (2012): 21–40.

When contesting an elected position, one candidate described her experience of intimidation and persistent harassment to withdraw her nomination. *“This one local power broker was really upset that I had put my nomination forward. He rang me up to encourage me to withdraw my nomination. I said ‘no’. He rang my parents to ask them to ask me to withdraw. Then he turned up to an event that my parents were going to and told them there again. He then got the local state member and local federal member to turn up to my house. It was basically stalking. He was harassing me to withdraw my nomination.”* In this case, the candidate took a break from branch level politics because of her frustration with the use of intimidation tactics.

Women seeking to contest pre-selections face threats related to their support within the party and their careers in politics. They are pressured to ‘wait their turn,’ or face exclusion and blacklisting, unless they withdraw their nomination. The power imbalance in these circumstances is stark. The perpetrator of the intimidation is often a senior person with influence and power within the party. To the candidate, these threats are credible. As one interviewee noted, women need to be prepared to face this intimidation in pre-selection contests. *“They are going to really pressure you to withdraw. What are you going to do when that senator calls you and says, ‘come on, you don’t want to ruin your career’? Because that call is going to happen. That is what happened to me.”*

Threatening tactics includes efforts to discredit the candidates in the eyes of public. Factional powerbrokers and their supporters will ‘background’ on candidates who threaten determined pre-selection contests. ‘Backgrounding’ is when someone provides information to a journal which they can public, but without attributing to a source. It is used to anonymously smear opponents.⁸⁴ Candidates interviewed in this study reported that they were backgrounded against by people within their own party in an effort to unfairly tarnish their reputation. Their personal information was leaked by party insiders and rumours were spread against them.

One of the most concerning and disheartening parts of the use of coercive tactics in pre-selection contests, is the long term effect it has on women candidates. After going through an unsafe process once, there is little incentive to try again. Furthermore, candidates interviewed considered that the intimidation was meant to scare them away from politics altogether. One candidate interviewed explained, *“the sad part is that they already had the numbers. They had 90 per cent of the vote needed. They ran this aggressive, intimidation campaign against me, I think, to warn me away forever. They wanted me to leave the party and never come back.”*

It is unclear how often intimidation tactics are used against women to prevent a competitive pre-selection contest. Gaining endorsement from a political party is highly sought after because of the resources and platform it provides election candidates. Why then are there so few candidates entering pre-selection contests? The fact that only a tiny percentage of publicly reported pre-selections are competitive contests with more than one candidate, indicates that candidates are being discouraged from nominating themselves.⁸⁵ The interviews conducted in this study show how it is highly possible it is that intimidation and harassment are preventing women candidates from stepping forward.

Bullying and persecution in pre-selection processes should not be accepted as a normal part of politics. As one candidate noted, *“anyone who is a member of the party has the right to nominate for any position. No one should accept the status quo of what has been arranged ten years ago. No one owns any role. It needs to be contested. It is up the vote of members. Not everyone likes that.”* Intimidation and harassment excludes women from fulfilling their potential in public office.

84 Chris Graham, “Ready, Fire, Aim: PM’s Office Caught ‘Leaking’ Against NSW Libs, Conservative Journal Confirms,” *New Matilda*, January 5, 2020, <https://newmatilda.com/2020/01/05/ready-fire-aim-pms-office-has-begun-leaking-against-nsw-libs-conservative-journal-confirms/>.

85 Gauja and Taflaga, “Candidates and Pre-Selection.”

Transparency and accountability need to be brought into the pre-selection process. A process that emphasises a candidate's experience and qualities that will represent their electorate is what is needed to put forward the best candidates—rather than the candidates who have been handpicked by factional powerbrokers and political party elites. This can be achieved through behavioural and rule-based reforms.

Regarding behaviour, there should be no tolerance for intimidation in the pre-selection processes of any political party. Both men and women were found to use intimidation tactics in the pre-selection process. All political parties should make not engaging in intimidation, bullying and harassment a requirement of receiving party endorsement. In other words, candidates found to have engaged in such behaviour should be barred from gaining pre-selection by any political party.

Political parties can back this principle by including intimidation in their codes of conduct. The ALP can lead by example by explicitly addressing intimidation in its National Code of Conduct. This is particularly the case for when individuals threaten another person's career progression and/or inclusion in the party. In pre-selections, individuals should be prohibited from telling or implying to another person that they will be blacklisted or destroying their careers if they nominate as a candidate. Simply put, intimidating behaviour should not be seen as an accepted part of politics.

In regard to rule-based reforms, there is the need for transparency and a contest of multiple candidates in pre-selection processes in order to stop the use of intimidation tactics. Importantly, the influence of factional powerbrokers within the pre-selection process needs to be disrupted. The Voices 4 Indi campaign and the use of the Candidate Identification Process could provide an important alternative to the influence exerted by a small group of individuals. In this process, the decision for the next pre-selected candidate was reached by consensus of 200 participants in a local forum. This was also a competitive process, with three nominees contesting to be the selected candidate.⁸⁶

As described, each political party has its own rules for pre-selection. This means that there is significant variation in how candidates are selected. Preselection processes which are more opaque, such as an electoral college vote, provide greater opportunity for intimidation tactics to be used. In a rank-and-file ballot, power is distributed more fairly amongst ordinary members. By virtue of numbers, it is harder to intimidate all voters in a rank-and-file process. Furthermore, a rank-and-file contest is more likely to have a greater number of candidates. Political parties, including each of the branches of the ALP, should review its pre-selection rules with a view to promoting transparency and contest, and to reducing the space for intimidation and bullying tactics.

Similarly, there should be a transparent application and enforcement of the Affirmative Action rule within all ALP branches. The rule's application should stay true to its spirit of improving gender diversity in the ALP. All branches of the ALP should report to their members how the rule has been applied and if they have met the target for pre-selecting women. ELA should continue to support the fair application of the Affirmative Action rule.

86 Australian Associated Press, "Cathy McGowan: Independent MP's Successor Chosen by Voices for Indi," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2019, sec. Australia news, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/13/cathy-mcgowan-independent-mps-successor-chosen-by-voices-for-indi>; Carolyn M. Hendriks, "Citizen-Led Democratic Reform: Innovations in Indi," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 481–99.

Candidates experience abuse and harassment during election campaigns

Once pre-selected by a political party, candidates interviewed consistently expressed that they faced abuse and harassment in the lead up to an election. For women, the nature of abuse is gendered and threats are often in relation to sexual violence. The experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse women in election campaigns are particularly harrowing because they are directly targeted with racism.

Understanding the effect of violence against women candidates is particularly important because their experiences play a key role in shaping their political ambitions and could deter them altogether from future participation in politics. Collignon and Rüdig note that the experiences of candidates is of ‘intrinsic importance if, as a result of harassment, people are deterred from becoming active in politics, or are effectively pushed into abandoning their political career before it has really started.’⁸⁷

The harassment of political candidates is common to most countries where elections are highly contested. In the UK, experiences of violence towards candidates is prevalent. Data from the Representative Audit of Britain Survey shows that in the 2017 general election, 45 per cent of female candidates reported suffering harassment and intimidation.⁸⁸ This increased by 11 per cent (to a total of 61 per cent) in the 2019 general election.⁸⁹ While harassment was found to be most common online, physical abuse and intimidation were also high, 32 per cent of women reported unwanted approaches by members of the public at their home, work, or a public place.⁹⁰

Women candidates in Australia face the full spectrum of abuse. To begin with, candidates encounter economic harm and abuse during the election campaign. They will often have their campaign material defaced or destroyed. As one survey respondent noted, “*expect to have corflutes damaged and graffitied.*” This abuse has a financial cost for candidates. It also seeks to humiliate them, especially if the graffiti is sexualised. However, these attacks are somewhat normalised and not often reported outside of the political party.

When such economic abuse is targeted at culturally diverse candidates, the harassment is racialized. Shireen Morris, ALP candidate for Deakin, reported how her campaign posters were defaced to depict her wearing a niqab. The motivation of this abuse was to use Islamophobia to turn voters against Morris.⁹¹ Interview participants reported similar experiences of abuse. “*My first time running was when I actually felt this experience of prejudice. Then, I had an office space that I had hired and I had decked it out in my branding. The same thing had happened there. Someone used red paint and put big red dots on my posters. Then they threw a brick through my window.*”

87 Sofia Collignon and Wolfgang Rüdig, “Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates in the United Kingdom,” *The Political Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2020): 428.

88 Collignon and Rüdig, “Harassment and Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates in the United Kingdom.”

89 Sofia Collignon, “The 2019 Election Campaign Shows That Abuse, Harassment and Intimidation of Candidates Is Getting Worse, Especially for Women,” *The Constitution Unit Blog* (blog), November 6, 2020, <https://constitution-unit.com/2020/11/06/the-2019-election-campaign-shows-that-abuse-harassment-and-intimidation-of-candidates-is-getting-worse-especially-for-women/>.

90 Collignon.

91 Nick Baker, “Vote 2019: ‘Dirty Tricks’ Continue on Polling Day,” SBS News, May 18, 2019, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/vote-2019-dirty-tricks-continue-on-polling-day>.

The abuse and racialized discrediting that candidates face during election periods often comes from other candidates and their supporters. One interview participant recounted that, *“there was another candidate knocking on doors saying that I won’t get elected because of my background. She was sort of creating a narrative to warn people off from voting for me because of my ethnic heritage.”* On reflecting on why this happened, the participant noted that, *“instead of fighting on policies, certain individuals decide to fight on personalities. In my experience, the way of discrediting my personality was to attack my race. They almost try to create a narrative to intimidate me from thinking that I could ever win.”*

The racist abuse that diverse women candidates face is mirrored in their interactions with the public. One interview participant recounted several experiences of abuse during her first election campaign. *“I remember the very first time I went out doorknocking, this guy was screaming and swearing at me. He was saying ‘I’m so proud of my daughter, she spits on people like you’. I remember I walked out of there and just broke down in tears. The tirade that this guy kept on giving me.”*

In the UK, threatening behaviour and abuse has led candidates to drastically change their behaviour.⁹² Women are being forced to think more about the personal risks of running in an election and are incentivised to adapt their actions and visibility as a result.⁹³ Rachel Reeves, Labour MP and Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, reported moving her campaign office to an inconspicuous location with no candidate advertising during the 2019 general election. For her safety, advertisements of Reeves’ location were limited. Her campaign team instead shared photos of appearances after they occurred.⁹⁴

The potential for abuse and harassment has a similarly chilling effect on women candidates’ political ambition in Australia. One individual surveyed stated that *“I’ve had to really consider the potential impact on both me and my family and friends of running. The experiences of other women have really scared me, to be honest.”* Participants in this study expressed that experiences of abuse and harassment during elections had made them question whether they would run for public office again.

How can candidates deal with abuse and harassment during election campaigns? The proactive approach in the UK provides an example for Australia. In 2019, the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the Electoral Commission jointly issued a nationwide set of safety guidelines for candidates in the general election.⁹⁵ A similar set of guidelines should be released by police forces and electoral commissions in Australia, to provide essential information to candidates. Political parties should support and assist in this initiative, and inform candidates of available support in the event of harassment.

92 Megan Specia, “Threats and Abuse on Campaign Trail: A Grim Reality for U.K. Female Candidates,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/04/world/europe/britain-election-women-threats.html>.

93 Collignon, “The 2019 Election Campaign Shows That Abuse, Harassment and Intimidation of Candidates Is Getting Worse, Especially for Women.”

94 Specia, “Threats and Abuse on Campaign Trail.”

95 Electoral Commission et al., “Joint Guidance for Candidates in Elections: When It Goes Too Far,” 2019, <https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/security-guidance-issued-to-help-candidates-stay-safe-on-the-campaign-trail>.

The *Joint Guidance for Candidates in Elections* offers relevant advice for candidates in Australia to help protect themselves and others. Critically, candidates in the UK have a single point of contact within their local force for candidate security, and the dedicated Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team (PLaIT) in the Metropolitan Police. The guidance also includes information on how to contact police, as well as advice to candidates on how to:

- Take active steps around personal safety to keep themselves and campaign staff safe;
- Canvass and door-knock safely;
- Keep records of intimidating behaviour and abuse;
- Conduct an online health check to ensure sensitive personal information is not widely available;
- Report intimidation or abuse to internet service providers and social media platforms; and
- Identify potential signals that behaviour could be escalating, such as threats of imminent violence, fixated ideas or the release of personal information not already in the public domain.

However, it is important to note that a climate of violence against women in politics begins with the treatment of others in the political contest. In the UK, 85 per cent of the harassment and intimidation experienced by women candidates came from supporters of other parties. The abuse that women candidates face is often politically motivated and aimed at preventing them from reaching public office by means of intimidation. Women expressed greater fear when the abuse came from supporters of other parties or opposition candidates.⁹⁶

This highlights the role of leaders and members of political parties in creating a higher standard of decency in public political culture. As noted by the UK Committee on Standards in Public Life, people engaged and working in politics shape the culture.⁹⁷ They should uphold high ethical standards, and should never engage in, incite, or encourage derogatory or dehumanising political debate. The Committee delivers a range of recommendations to political parties and those in public life, all of which are essential to improving the experiences of candidates in Australia. Following the UK example, political parties should demonstrate leadership and high ethical standards by ensuring that campaign volunteers, employees and candidates are prohibited from abusing—and trained not to abuse—political opponents.

In addition, the public can also work to stop the harassment of candidates in Australia. One candidate shared that she had been the subject to an campaign of misinformation which became progressively more malicious and sought her personal contact information. Members of the public reported the misinformation to the Australian Electoral Commission, which then reported it to the Australian Federal Police who took further action. *“A whole bunch of people from different parts of the country started reporting it to the Electoral Commission, saying ‘What are you doing to do about this? Because this is not right’. This was from people who were on different sides of politics, who weren’t engaged in politics, people who just felt really unhappy with what was going on.”* This highlights the public dissatisfaction with the intimidation and harassment of candidates. Political parties and affiliated organisations can work together to inform and engage the public of avenues to report the harassment of candidates.

96 Collignon, “The 2019 Election Campaign Shows That Abuse, Harassment and Intimidation of Candidates Is Getting Worse, Especially for Women.”

97 Committee on Standards in Public Life, “Intimidation in Public Life: A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life” (UK, 2017), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intimidation-in-public-life-a-review-by-the-committee-on-standards-in-public-life>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 All political parties should make not engaging in intimidation, bullying and harassment a requirement of receiving party endorsement. Candidates found to have engaged in such behaviour should be barred from gaining pre-selection by any political party.

- 3.2 Political parties should include intimidation in their codes of conduct. The ALP can lead by example by explicitly addressing intimidation in its National Code of Conduct. This should encompass intimidating comments or behaviour which threaten another person's career progression and/or inclusion in the party.

- 3.3 Political parties, including each of the branches of the ALP, should review its pre-selection rules in order to promote transparency and competitiveness of contests, and reduce the ability of intimidation and bullying tactics to be used.

- 3.4 ELA should continue its critical work in supporting and lobbying for the fair application of the Affirmative Action rule in the ALP. All branches of the ALP should report to its members how the rule has been applied and if it has met the target for pre-selecting women.

- 3.5 Following the example of the UK, safety guideless for candidates in election should be released by police forces and electoral commissions in Australia. Political parties should support and assist in this initiative, and inform candidates of available support in the event of harassment.

- 3.6 Leaders and members of political parties are influential in setting a standard of respect during elections. Political parties should demonstrate leadership and high ethical standards by ensuring that campaign volunteers, employees and candidates receive training not to abuse political opponents and that these behaviours are prohibited.

- 3.7 Public dissatisfaction with the harassment of political candidates is strong. Political parties and affiliated organisations can work together to inform and empower the public of ways to report the harassment of candidates to the Australian Electoral Commission or Australian Federal Police.



PART 4

Members of Parliament

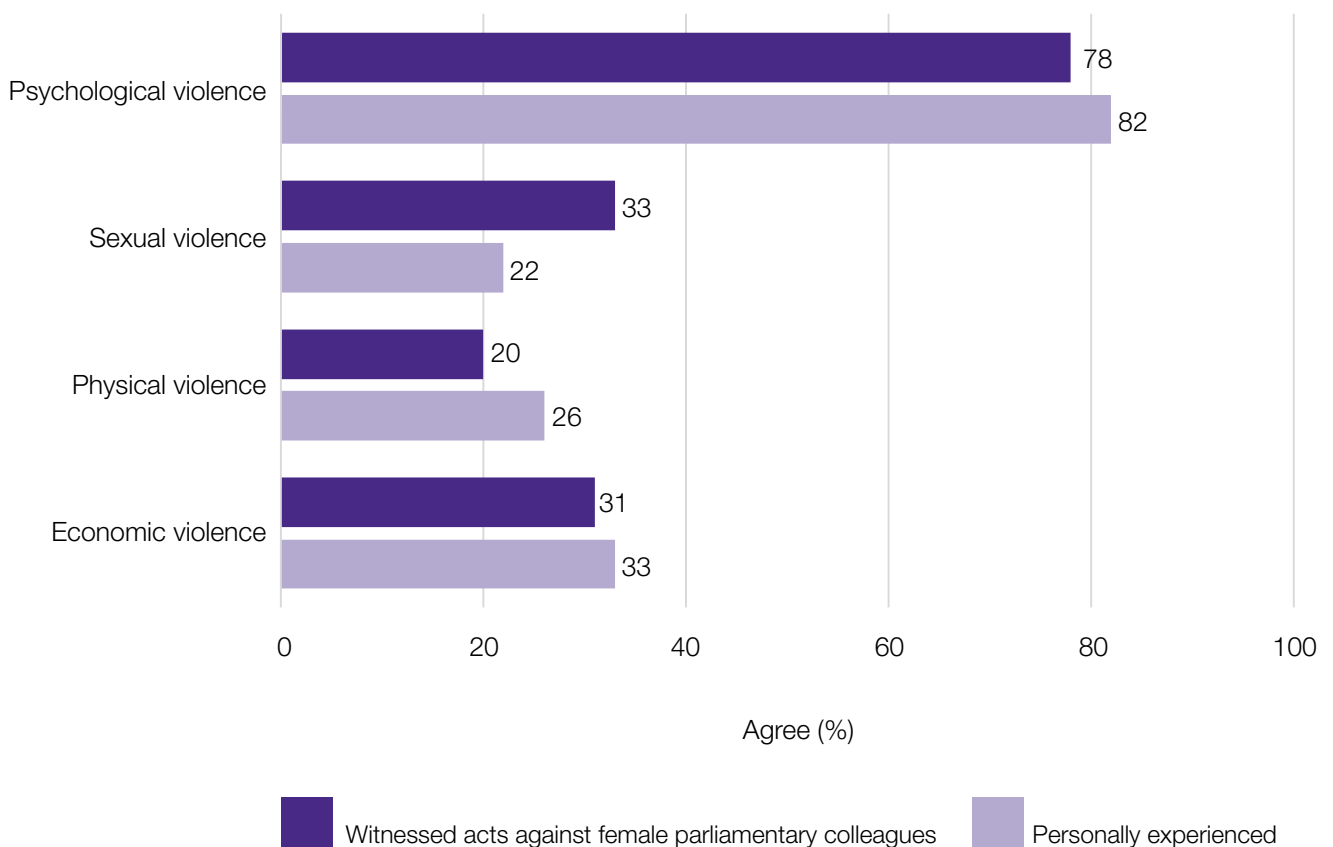
Violence against women in politics affects women across the political pipeline, from girls interested in politics to candidates in elections. Of the women who were initially politically interested, few are successfully elected to parliaments in Australia. This report has so far demonstrated how violence against women in politics reduces the number of women who are able and willing to enter public office. The final part of this report focusses on the gendered experiences of MPs.

Violence against women in politics is most visible when it directed at women in public office. Due to their increased public profile and the persistence of sexist attitudes within segments of the community, women MPs face relentless abuse and harassment from members of the public. Within Parliament House, bullying also occurs between MPs. Accumulated experiences of abuse and harassment lead women MPs to retire or exit their political careers prematurely. In this way, violence against women in politics again undermines the progress of women's political leadership in Australia.

Violence against women parliamentarians is a global issue

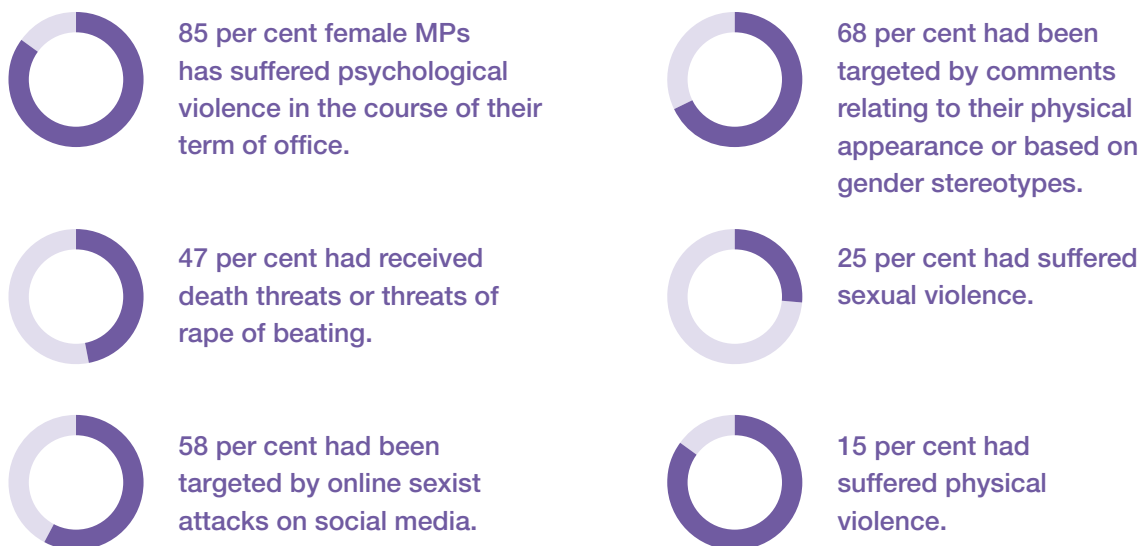
Violence against women in public office is a witnessed around the world. A comprehensive study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) found widespread abuse of female parliamentarians.⁹⁸ It included quantitative and qualitative data from women parliamentarians from 39 countries across Africa, Europe, Asia, Americas, and Arab regions. Women parliamentarians around the world reported experiencing and witnessing all forms of violence, the most prominent of which was psychological violence. Figure 8 shows the results of the IPU survey.

FIGURE 8:
Inter-Parliamentary Union survey – Prevalence of violence against women parliamentarians globally



98 Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians."

Additional research by the IPU of parliaments in Europe confirmed the high prevalence of violence against women parliamentarians.⁹⁹ The study found that:



The prevalence of violence against women parliamentarians in Australia is likely to follow global rates. This report provides evidence of the experience of women MPs in the Australian context. The following subsections examines abuse and harassment of women MPs in Australia from two groups. Firstly, the threat of violence posed by the public, and secondly, persecution from other parliamentarians.

Abuse and harassment from members of the public is substantial

Women MPs are the targets of abuse and harassment from members of the public. This maltreatment can come through direct contact through letters, phone calls, emails, or visits from members of the public to electorate offices. Persecution is also persistent online on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁰⁰ Every parliamentarian—and most public figures in Australian society—is at one time likely to receive abuse from the public. What is clear is that for women MPs, such assault is more often gendered. Online slurs against women are sexist and misogynistic in nature; threats are sexualised and usually include references to women’s bodies.¹⁰¹

99 Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe,” Issues Brief (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018), <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe>.

100 Elle Hunt, Nick Evershed, and Ri Liu, “From Julia Gillard to Hillary Clinton: Online Abuse of Politicians around the World,” *The Guardian*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/datablog/ng-interactive/2016/jun/27/from-julia-gillard-to-hillary-clinton-online-abuse-of-politicians-around-the-world>.

101 Azmina Dhrodia, “Unsocial Media: A Toxic Place for Women,” *IPPR Progressive Review* 24, no. 4 (2018): 380–87.

Harassment targeted at women on social media is a growing issue in the wider community. A large study by Amnesty International found widespread online abuse of women on social media across eight countries.¹⁰² Of all women surveyed, almost one in four (23 per cent) said that they had experienced online abuse. Of those who had experienced online abuse, 41 per cent said that it made them feel that their physical safety was threatened. Women described that, after the abuse, they were left feeling stressed, anxious, and with an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness.¹⁰³

The issue of online abuse becomes even more acute when the experiences of women in public office are considered. Further research by Amnesty International found relentless persecution and personal threats directed at women MPs in the lead up to the 2017 UK general election. Women of colour and other politically underrepresented groups are disproportionately targeted by online abuse. The experience of Diane Abbott—Labour MP and the first Black female MP elected to the UK—exemplifies the intersectional nature of online abuse. In the lead-up to the 2017 election, Abbott received almost half (45 per cent) of all abusive Tweets against women MPs, and almost one third (31 per cent) of all abusive Tweets in the campaign period.

The intersectional nature of abuse directed towards women MPs from members of the public is similarly witnessed in Australia. Intersectional discrimination against culturally diverse women MPs means that the abuse they face is not only sexist, but violently racist. Dr Anne Aly MP, Member of Cowan and the first female Muslim MP, recently described in a speech to Parliament the horrific abuse that she receives daily from members of the public. The letters, phone calls, and messages that her office is subject to are often consist of graphic death and rape threats. As Aly described, 'I have somebody who regularly writes to me addressing his letters to the 'ISIS whore'.'¹⁰⁴

The MPs interviewed in this study revealed that abuse from the public is highly normalised in Australia. Here, it is widely accepted that you will receive threatening and violent messages whilst holding public office. Yet, as one interview participant noted, "*it shouldn't be the case that I'm so used to it that it doesn't bother me anymore. Hearing myself say it shocks me: 'you're so used to the death threats, the abuse, the name calling, that you don't even think it anymore?'*"

Participants suggested that the abuse they receive is the product of having a public profile, within which they are identifiable to individuals who feel aggrieved. A number of interview participants expressed empathy towards the people who harass them, describing them as "*incredibly distraught, mentally ill people.*" As one MP explained, "*people are in complex situations and bad things happen in their lives. I think part of it is about showing a bit of empathy and understanding that you are in a privileged position, and this comes with some of this.*"

102 Countries included were UK, USA, Spain, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, Poland and New Zealand.

103 Amnesty International, "Why Twitter Is a Toxic Place for Women"; Dhrodia, "Unsocial Media."

104 Anne Aly, "Speeches: Federal Parliament - Women in Parliament," March 18, 2021, <https://www.anealy.com/news/speeches/federal-parliament-women-in-parliament/>.

However, research shows that what motivates members of the public to abuse women MPs is complex. In a recent national study conducted in the UK, James *et al.* find that 58 per cent of parliamentarians had been stalked or harassed. The stalking and harassment were found to be motivated by personal grievances or mental illness.¹⁰⁵ However, the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that stalking and harassment was undertaken by people affiliated with politics. The women MPs surveyed and interviewed attributed such behaviour not to people who were mentally unwell, but to people seeking to discourage them from being vocal and politically active. Of those who had been subjected to sexist behaviour and violence, 52 per cent considered that perpetrators had acted with full knowledge of the consequences.¹⁰⁶

The abuse that MPs experience on social media and directly from the public causes significant personal harm. Over time, it takes a toll and pushes individuals to leave public office early. There is great appeal in having privacy and not being forced to face constant threats. In the UK, 18 sitting women MPs chose not to seek re-election in the 2019 general election. Many of these women cited the barrage of threats, abuse, and intimidation they received as the reason they chose to leave public office.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, a recent study by Gorrell *et al.* found a statistically significant relationship between experiencing online abuse and leaving politics. Parliamentarians who chose to stand down had consistently received more abuse in the year leading up to the 2019 UK general election than parliamentarians who did not.¹⁰⁸

Members of parliament have different ways of handling the persistent abuse that they receive. Most members try to ignore abusive messages, or block and mute members of the public on social media. There is some debate amongst parliamentarians about whether blocking members of the public is an appropriate choice by those in public office. However, most felt that blocking abusers on social media was acceptable and necessary, a technique that they would recommend other women in politics. *“I feel completely justified in blocking them. I find it quite liberating.”*

It is not acceptable that women in public office are the targets of relentless abuse and these women should not be expected to respond to harassment. As one MP noted, *“if someone is making a fair point of a reasonable criticism of party policy or they disagree with something I’ve said, that is a different matter. It is important to read that and consider it. But as soon as someone starts making threats, especially threats of violence or sexual assault, they have lost their right. They have lost their ability to convince me. They have also lost their right to take their correspondence seriously and to treat it as I would any other correspondence.”*

105 David V. James *et al.*, “Harassment and Stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: Associations and Consequences,” *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2016): 309–30.

106 Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians.”

107 Megan Specia, “Threats and Abuse Prompt Female Lawmakers to Leave U.K. Parliament,” *The New York Times*, November 1, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/01/world/europe/women-parliament-abuse.html>.

108 Genevieve Gorrell *et al.*, “Which Politicians Receive Abuse? Four Factors Illuminated in the UK General Election 2019,” *EPJ Data Science* 9, no. 1 (December 1, 2020): 18.

Staff within parliamentary offices also filter inappropriate communication. They work to protect their MPs from seeing abusive messages. In most cases, this is an assumed role and not one with specific guidelines for political staff and volunteers. While the MPs interviewed expressed gratitude for this support, it is important to recognise that staff can also be harmed by constantly seeing violent content. Women working in parliamentary offices are likely to be discouraged from seeking public office upon seeing the threats that their MPs receive. There is room to improve support and training for staff in parliamentary offices who take on the difficult work of filtering abusive messages.

MPs also take time away from social media and have accounts only used by staff for particular periods. Though this is a self-protective mechanism, it is not a solution. Taking time away from or permanently leaving social media means that women are being forced out of online platforms. Online abuse disadvantages women MPs, as society's use of social media to engage with politics only grows. One interview participant described that she does not spend time on social media engaging directly with people because of the abuse she often receives. She described this exclusion as a shame, "*because social media is a useful way to engage with your constituents and get them to know you.*"

Expecting women MPs to deal with online abuse by stepping away from social media platforms places the burden on the victim. This response denies women their right to freedom of expression and fails to acknowledge that stopping social media use is not always an option. Women MPs rely on these platforms to engage with their constituents and the wider public. If women are intimidated out of social media, it effects their ability to speak out and be heard online and offline.¹⁰⁹ If the prevalence of online abuse continues to grow at its current rate, the effect of driving women in politics off social media is likely to contribute to a reduction in the number of women elected to public office in the long term.

The threat of physical violence from members of the public is credible and should be taken seriously, even if such abuse is received through social media. In some circumstances, parliamentarians have taken significant, onerous steps to protect their safety. Several of the women MPs interviewed for this study reported having stalkers. Individuals who were known to them were emboldened to repeatedly send them intimidating remarks that posed a significant threat to their safety. Women reported having extra police patrols around their houses and security, including close personal protection. More than one MP relayed having to move house because of abuse and the ongoing threat of physical violence.

The fear that virtual abuse could result in physical violence is omnipresent. As one interview participant noted, "*you have to ensure that that you are taking it seriously, particularly if the threats involve your office and staff. The threats are serious, because one day someone could lose their mind and try to kill you.*"

Women MPs should be informed, trained, and empowered to challenge online abuse. UK organisation Glitch is a great example of a collective working to end online abuse through awareness, advocacy, and action.¹¹⁰ It has developed a toolkit specifically for women in politics and their staff: '*Dealing with digital threats of democracy: A toolkit to help women in public life be safer online*'.¹¹¹ This is a valuable resource with information on how to protect yourself online, and should be shared amongst all candidates and MPs. Glitch also delivers paid, tailored training workshops to organisations so as to equip them with the skills needed to prevent online harm. Political parties, including the ALP, should provide such training to their MPs and staff.

109 Dhrodia, "Unsocial Media."

110 Glitch, "Glitch," 2021, <https://glitchcharity.co.uk/about/>.

111 Glitch, "Dealing with Digital Threats of Democracy: A Toolkit to Help Women in Public Life Be Safer Online" (Glitch, 2021), <https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Dealing-with-digital-threats-to-democracy-PDF-FINAL-1.pdf>.

In addition, the public can be encouraged to assist with the prevention of the abuse of women MPs on social media. Gender Equity Victoria has developed the Online Active Bystander Project, which includes a toolkit for people who want to take a stand against online abuse.¹¹² It offers useful tips on what to comment on degrading messages and how to show support for the victim. All members of the public are encouraged to become Online Active Bystanders. Political parties and associated organisations, including the ALP and ELA, can help to promote this resource and encourage their members to use it.

The abuse from members of the public online needs direct intervention from social media companies who need to take their responsibility seriously. At present, these companies consider themselves as ‘passive platforms’ with limited control over user content.¹¹³ They have taken little responsibility for the content posted through their websites. Social media companies must take proactive steps to curb online abuse. This includes publishing data and providing clarity on how reports of abuse are handled and improving reporting mechanisms, as well as security and privacy features.¹¹⁴

In terms of reporting, MPs interviewed in this study noted that serious threats of physical harm are reported to police in Australia. However, if the abusive emails and messages are considered ‘low level’ they are often left to the MP and staff in parliamentary offices to monitor. Given the sheer amount of abuse that MPs receive, there is risk that credible threats will slip through the cracks and will not be given adequate consideration. Police forces should maintain contact with MPs and their staff and provide assistance in identifying threats of harm.

In the UK, it has been found that there is inconsistency in the approaches taken by law enforcement forces in policing abuse and intimidating behaviour directed toward MPs. The Committee on Standards in Public Life found that this may be due to the police not fully understanding the context in which MPs operate, as well as the social media technologies themselves.¹¹⁵ It recommended that better guidance and training for police occur in this area. These lessons can be applied in Australia, where MPs have described similar challenges in reporting abuse.

Reporting to police does not always address the psychological harm that abuse can cause. There is the risk that less violent abuse and threats are endured because they are not ‘serious’ enough to warrant a police report. At present, the eSafety Commissioner has limited power in addressing adult cyber abuse and only accepts certain types of reports, such as image-based abuse and sexual extortion. However, the eSafety Commissioner’s recent program *Women In The Spotlight* (WITS) indicates that it recognises women who have a public presence due to their work as frequent targets of abuse. Enhancing the role and funding of the eSafety Commissioner to accept a wider range of online abuse reports from women in public office would improve the reporting mechanisms available to MPs experiencing abuse.¹¹⁶

The eSafety Commissioner through the WITS program also offers social media self-defence training. This provides information and training to women about managing social media safely instead of being forced to leave the platforms.¹¹⁷ ELA and the ALP should work with the eSafety Commissioner to arrange for this training to be made available to their endorsed candidates and MPs.

112 Gender Equity Victoria, “Online Active Bystander Project,” 2018, <https://www.genvic.org.au/focus-areas/gendered-violence/online-active-bystander-project/>.

113 Committee on Standards in Public Life, “Intimidation in Public Life.”

114 Amnesty International, “Why Twitter Is a Toxic Place for Women.”

115 Committee on Standards in Public Life, “Intimidation in Public Life.”

116 eSafety Commissioner, “Women In The Spotlight,” eSafety Commissioner, 2021, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/women/women-in-the-spotlight>.

117 eSafety Commissioner, “Social Media Self Defence,” 2021, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/women/women-in-the-spotlight/social-media-self-defence>.

Harassment and bullying occurs between members of parliament

Parliamentarians are subjected to harassment and bullying within their workplace as has been demonstrated on national broadcasts of parliamentary debate and speeches made by women. Reflecting the power structures and imbalances which operates within Parliament House, when women MPs experience harassment and bullying, it is from other parliamentarians. In most cases, interview participants noted that sexual harassment was from senior members of parliament directed at more junior or younger women parliamentarians. This follows international trends, whereby research has found that female MPs under the age of 40 are more frequently subject to psychological and sexual harassment.¹¹⁸

In Australia, harassment between MPs takes the form of unwanted sexualised attention and behaviour. Interview participants described hearing inappropriate sexualised comments and texts. They also heard of others being propositioned and advanced upon. Recently, former MP Julia Banks described experiencing an unwanted sexual advance from a cabinet minister when she was in office.¹¹⁹ Experiences of sexual harassment are also intersectional. Culturally and linguistically diverse women interviewed, reported facing additional sexualised fetishism and attention. As one interview participant described, *“there were men who wolf-whistled, ‘Look at you, you look so good today’. I don’t take it just because I am a women.”*

Bullying between MPs takes the form of intimidation and repeated harassment. Senator Sarah Hanson-Young called out the sexist verbal abuse she received from other parliamentarians whilst in the Senate chamber. She described being stalked in the chamber by former Senator Cory Bernardi who whispered names of men at her while she spoke in a late sitting.¹²⁰ In 2019, former Senator David Leyonhjelm was ordered to pay \$120,000 to Senator Hanson-Young by the Federal Court because of defamatory comments he had made. These comments attacked and ‘slut shamed’ Senator Hanson-Young within the Senate chamber and in the mainstream media. Senator Hanson-Young described feeling bullied and intimidated.¹²¹

Bullying is not limited to political adversaries and can occur between parliamentarians of the same party. MPs face bullying from their colleagues through persistent exclusion and undermining. Interview participants described how MPs threatened others from working with them, spread rumours to discredit them, and in one instance the intimidation escalated to physical aggression. The perpetrators of such intra-party bullying are both men and women. They undertake bullying tactics for calculated personal, power, or electoral gain. Experiencing relentless bullying from colleagues has a substantial impact on personal wellbeing and career progression in politics. As one interview participant described, *“I hesitated to run again for election. I almost just didn’t want to go through it again.”*

When bullying occurs between members of parliament of the same party, it is especially difficult to stand up against or disclose to others. Victims of bullying face the pressure to present an image of party unity. As one former MP noted, *“a lot of these things happen internally and don’t get the light of day. Even if a journalist rings you, you are torn between ‘do I say something to try and end this’ or ‘will I damage the party because it is the party we want in government’.”*

118 Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe.”

119 Banks, *Power Play: Breaking through Bias, Barriers and Boys’ Clubs*.

120 Sarah Hanson-Young, *En Garde* (Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2018).

121 Claire Campbell, “Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young Wins Defamation Case against David Leyonhjelm,” *ABC News*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-25/sarah-hanson-young-wins-defamation-case-against-leyonhjelm/11734322>.

There are few effective avenues for reporting and resolving bullying and harassment between members of parliament. At present, members of parliament who experience bullying or harassment from colleagues are likely to discuss the matter to a senior leader within their party. However, whether further action is taken from this disclosure is patchy. It is likely that the perpetrator will deny allegations. Furthermore, power structures within political parties allows bullying behaviour to go unchecked. People are unwilling to take a stand against bullying in order to protect their bases of support and votes within caucus. However, this means that bullying behaviour continues to be rewarded and condoned as perpetrators maintain their power unchecked.

Experiences of abuse, harassment and bullying contributes to women leaving politics

Experiences of harassment, abuse and bullying are not the sole reason that women MPs leave politics. Instead, it is part of a range of gendered factors which leads them to end their political careers prematurely. This includes the pressures that being in politics places on women with family and caring responsibilities, through frequent periods away from home and long hours. Gender discrimination also plays an influential role in a woman's decision to leave politics. This includes women being overlooked for positions because of their gender, whether through explicit or implicit sexist attitudes. Ultimately, experiences of violence against women in politics combines with other unfairly gendered experiences, leading women to leave the Australian Parliament because *"they have become tired and frustrated with the way that politics works."*

For women who experience sexual harassment and sexist behaviour from their parliamentary colleagues, it leads them to *"lose respect for that person and for the institution."* They are forced to reconsider the point of being a member of parliament, with all the personal and family sacrifices that are needed, if they are to be demeaned and disrespected anyway. As one MP described, *"I can think of plenty of people who got sick of the job, and sexual harassment and bullying were part of the reason they were sick of it."*

There are certainly women whose experiences within Parliament House have caused them to leave their parties and choose not to recontest elections, such as former MPs Nicole Flint and Emma Hussar. Experiencing bullying and harassment, especially from colleagues, takes a great personal toll. It is part of the reason why individuals do not consider re-entering politics. As one participant noted, *"I get asked all the time, 'would you go back and run again?' Until those people are gone, why would I? Why would I put myself through that again? Now that I am outside of it I feel so free of it. But at the same time when I go to Canberra, I do feel like my time was cut short. I feel a loss, or disappointment."*

While parliamentarians will be included in the forthcoming independent complaints mechanism in Parliament House, the likelihood that they will report abuse and harassment is low. This is especially the case if the perpetrator is from their own political party. Bringing a complaint against a parliamentary colleague could jeopardise the working relationships within the party and lead to a greater fallout for the victim. The experiences of the women MPs interviewed show that they have to put up with a great deal of unsavoury behaviour, and in most cases they chose to grin and bear it to keep their position. However, the possibility that abuse could be reported to an independent complaints mechanism could also deter the behaviour.

Ultimately, reducing the harassment and bullying between MPs in the Australian Parliament will require cultural change within the institution. This is becoming harder to achieve as politics becomes more partisan and with less respect shown across the chamber. Cultural change will require all individual MPs to take it upon themselves to act with the dignity and integrity that the community expects of them.

In the UK Parliament, such expectations are laid out in its wide ranging, separate, codes of conduct for ministers, MPs, lords, staff and special advisers. Critically, the UK Parliament's Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme is underpinned by the Behaviour Code, the Bullying and Harassment Policy, and Bullying and Harassment Procedure, the Sexual Misconduct Policy, and the Sexual Misconduct Procedure. These codes of conduct and policies are enforceable. The Behaviour Code, in particular, clears set standards for behaviour amongst people in Parliament.¹²²

The question of whether Australia should have a code of conduct for parliamentarians has been raised repeatedly since 1975 with no substantive outcome.¹²³ At present, Australia has a Statement of Ministerial Standards which applies only to government ministers and is not independently enforced.¹²⁴ Unlike in the UK Parliament, there is no behaviour code of conduct which the newly proposed independent complaints mechanism will be able to enforce. The revelations of abuse and harassment against women in politics in Australia must be the tipping point for this important step to come into action.

However, the most important change to the culture of politics will be reaching a critical mass of women in Parliament House. This was raised repeatedly by the women interviewed in this study. The culture of politics in Australia is still hyper-masculine. This is reflected in the institutional rules and processes, including in Question Time.¹²⁵ As one interviewee described, "*Question Time is about men shirt-fronting.*" It is also reflected in the continuing allegations of harassment between MPs. The balance of genders in the Parliament and in leadership positions in parties, sets the culture and tone for the rest of the country. Until there is a critical mass of women within the Parliament, and in both major parties, the cycle of violence against women in politics will continue.

122 UK Parliament, "Conduct in Parliament," 2021, <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/parliaments-behaviour-code/>.

123 Deirdre McKeown, "Codes of Conduct in Australian and Selected Overseas Parliaments," (Parliamentary Library, September 18, 2012), Australia, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/Conduct#_Toc325623493.

124 The Centre for Public Integrity, "Code of Conduct" (The Centre for Public Integrity, June 2021), <https://publicintegrity.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Briefing-paper-Parliamentary-code-of-conduct.pdf>.

125 Thwaites and Macklin, *Enough Is Enough*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Women MPs should be informed, trained and empowered to challenge online abuse. Political parties and associated organisations, including the ALP and ELA, can help to share resources such as UK organisation Glitch's toolkit amongst its endorsed candidates and MPs.

- 4.2 Political parties should provide online self-defence training to MPs and their staff. Staff in particular need better training to handle online abuse, as they are ones who often take on the difficult work of filtering threatening messages. Two possible training programs available are from the eSafety Commissioner and Glitch.

- 4.3 All members of the public can contribute to stopping abuse against women MPs online. Political parties and women's organisations, including the ALP and ELA, should promote the Gender Equity Victoria's Online Active Bystander resource to its members and encourage them to use it.

- 4.4 Social media companies need to take proactive steps to curb online abuse. This includes publishing data and providing clarity on how reports of abuse are handled, improving reporting mechanisms, as well as security and privacy features.

- 4.5 Parliament should encourage police forces to maintain regular contact with MPs and their staff and provide greater assistance in identifying threats of harm from abuse from members of the public. Following the UK experience, police should have better training to understand the context in which MPs operate, as well as social media technologies.

- 4.6 The government should enhance the role of the eSafety Commissioner to accept a wider range of online abuse reports from women MPs.

- 4.7 A code of conduct of MPs should be introduced. As in the UK Parliament, this code of conduct should underpin the proposed independent complaints mechanism of the Australian Parliament. Without a code of conduct a gap in enforcement remains.

Conclusion

Violence against women in politics has significantly limited the progress of women's political leadership in Australia. This report has demonstrated how experiences of abuse, harassment, and intimidation impacts women from the time they are girls expressing an interest in politics, to when they become women holding senior public office. Experiences of violence at each stage of the journey into politics forces some women to leave their aspirations for leadership behind. They are pushed to exit their political careers before they are able to fulfil their potential.

This report has shown that the poor reputation of politics and the recent exposure of sexual harassment in Parliament House further discourages girls from choosing a career in politics. Amongst those who do become volunteers and employees in political organisations, the prevalence of violence is widespread. Experiencing abuse significantly impacts these women's decision to continue their careers in politics and their prospects for professional advancement. Employees and volunteers strongly demand that reporting mechanisms should be transparent, confidential, independent, and deliver prompt resolutions with direct consequences for perpetrators.

Furthermore, upon becoming candidates, these women face threatening intimidation tactics during pre-selection contests to discourage them from nominating. This coercion and pressure often comes from members of their own political party. If successfully endorsed by their political party, candidates face increasing harassment from the public. Once elected to public office, the threatening messages and abuse women MPs face from the public is relentless. They also experience bullying and harassment from other MPs within Parliament House. The accumulation of abuse and other gendered factors forces some women to leave their political careers too soon.

The findings of this report suggest that there are hundreds of women who should have been in positions of political leadership throughout Australian history but were deterred because of experiences of violence. They are the missing women of Australian politics – competent, enthusiastic, and inspiring individuals who were targeted by abuse to force them out.

This also raises the question of who remains in power and politics. It is possible that there are people who have used coercive and bullying tactics to make their way along the political pipeline and into public office, and protect and support others to follow in their footsteps. It is time that all people in politics in Australia demonstrate the respect, dignity, and integrity that is expected of them.

This report presents important recommendations to reduce violence against women, and improve the culture of politics in Australia. Through analysis of examples of international best practice, these recommendations present opportunities for change in Australia. These recommendations will improve the good work of ELA, the ALP, and other political parties and organisations to continue to support women in politics.

Summary of recommendations

PART I

Women and girls interested in politics

- 1.1 Young women and girls must be specifically targeted to become engaged in politics and nurture their political ambition. ELA, women's organisations, and political parties should seek to expand their membership bases amongst younger women.

- 1.2 Young women and girls need to have greater exposure to what the role of MPs entails. All parliamentarians should participate in Jasiri Australia's *Girls Takeover Parliament*. ELA can encourage its endorsed MPs to participate in the program. MPs should advertise internships and work experience placements in their parliamentary and electorate offices for girls and young women from their local community.

- 1.3 Young women and girls are attracted to politics by the opportunity to contribute to social movements and collective action initiatives currently undertaken by political organisations. Political parties should work to foster an inclusive environment for young women, and encourage them to get involved in campaigning. ELA can set an example and lead this work by actively encouraging young women to join the ELA Action Groups in each state and territory.

- 1.4 Young women and girls need to be shown that they already hold the personal qualities needed to be a political leader. ELA and other like-minded, progressive women's organisations can affirm this. Using the Equal Power campaign from the UK as a model, ELA should explore working with other women's organisations in Australia to attract more young women into politics. ELA should specifically build partnerships with progressive women's group which focus on diversity in leadership, so as to attract more underrepresented women into politics.

PART 2

Employees and volunteers

- 2.1 Reporting mechanisms for abuse and harassment within political parties and political organisations must uphold the following essential principles: transparency, confidentiality, and independence. They must promptly resolve the complaint, and have direct consequences for perpetrators.

- 2.2 Political party codes of conduct should be widely publicised to increase awareness amongst employees and volunteers. The ALP can show leadership in this area by ensuring that existing members are aware and knowledgeable of the ALP National Code of Conduct and accompanying policies. These policies should be given to all new members upon joining the party.

- 2.3 Once the ALP National Code of Conduct and accompanying policies have been put into practice, the ALP will need to review its reporting mechanism to ensure that it meets the essential principles recognised in this report.

- 2.4 Within the Parliament and across political parties, training programs for men should be established which focus on appropriate behaviour and being an active bystander.

- 2.5 An independent complaints mechanism must be established within the Australian Parliament. The principles and practices highlighted in this report should be central to the mechanism, which must prioritise and proactively increase confidence in its processes.

- 2.6 To improve confidence, it is essential that there is equal gender representation at each stage of the independent complaints mechanism, and particularly within parliamentary bodies giving oversight (including the Privileges Committees).

- 2.7 The Australian Parliament should regularly publish information on the number of calls made to the Parliamentary Support Line, to ensure that the support mechanism is widely used.

- 2.8 Support structures and informal mechanisms should be strengthened in political parties and organisations. ELA can continue to lead this work through its regular planned events and joint events with other ALP women's networks. Through these events women will continue to develop professional and personal support communities.

- 2.9 Political parties should build informal reporting mechanisms and support structures to enable early intervention directed towards violence against women in politics. This includes having more senior female staff, and staff from other minority or intersecting identity groups, in parliamentary offices. They should be provided training and support, as they are likely to be the ones approached with informal reports.

PART 3

Candidates

- 3.1 All political parties should make not engaging in intimidation, bullying and harassment a requirement of receiving party endorsement. Candidates found to have engaged in such behaviour should be barred from gaining pre-selection by any political party.

- 3.2 Political parties should include intimidation in their codes of conduct. The ALP can lead by example by explicitly addressing intimidation in its National Code of Conduct. This should encompass intimidating comments or behaviour which threaten another person's career progression and/or inclusion in the party.

- 3.3 Political parties, including each of the branches of the ALP, should review its pre-selection rules in order to promote transparency and competitiveness of contests, and reduce the ability of intimidation and bullying tactics to be used.

- 3.4 ELA should continue its critical work in supporting and lobbying for the fair application of the Affirmative Action rule in the ALP. All branches of the ALP should report to its members how the rule has been applied and if it has met the target for pre-selecting women.

- 3.5 Following the example of the UK, safety guideless for candidates in election should be released by police forces and electoral commissions in Australia. Political parties should support and assist in this initiative, and inform candidates of available support in the event of harassment.

- 3.6 Leaders and members of political parties are influential in setting a standard of respect during elections. Political parties should demonstrate leadership and high ethical standards by ensuring that campaign volunteers, employees and candidates receive training not to abuse political opponents and that these behaviours are prohibited.

- 3.7 Public dissatisfaction with the harassment of political candidates is strong. Political parties and affiliated organisations can work together to inform and empower the public of ways to report the harassment of candidates to the Australian Electoral Commission or Australian Federal Police.

PART 4

Members of Parliament

- 4.1 Women MPs should be informed, trained and empowered to challenge online abuse. Political parties and associated organisations, including the ALP and ELA, can help to share resources such as UK organisation Glitch's toolkit amongst its endorsed candidates and MPs.

- 4.2 Political parties should provide online self-defence training to MPs and their staff. Staff in particular need better training to handle online abuse, as they are ones who often take on the difficult work of filtering threatening messages. Two possible training programs available are from the eSafety Commissioner and Glitch.

- 4.3 All members of the public can contribute to stopping abuse against women MPs online. Political parties and women's organisations, including the ALP and ELA, should promote the Gender Equity Victoria's Online Active Bystander resource to its members and encourage them to use it.

- 4.4 Social media companies need to take proactive steps to curb online abuse. This includes publishing data and providing clarity on how reports of abuse are handled, improving reporting mechanisms, as well as security and privacy features.

- 4.5 Parliament should encourage police forces to maintain regular contact with MPs and their staff and provide greater assistance in identifying threats of harm from abuse from members of the public. Following the UK experience, police should have better training to understand the context in which MPs operate, as well as social media technologies.

- 4.6 The government should enhance the role of the eSafety Commissioner to accept a wider range of online abuse reports from women MPs.

- 4.7 A code of conduct of MPs should be introduced. As in the UK Parliament, this code of conduct should underpin the proposed independent complaints mechanism of the Australian Parliament. Without a code of conduct a gap in enforcement remains.





EMILY's List Australia

210 Lonsdale Street,
Melbourne, VIC 3000
(03) 8668 8120
ceo@emilyslist.org.au

www.emilyslist.org.au

THANK YOU TO OUR PRINCIPAL SPONSOR



THANK YOU TO OUR MAJOR SPONSOR

