



Addressing violence against women in politics:

Institutional responses and good practices by parliaments



Government
of Ireland
International
Development
Programme

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Foreword from the UNDP

Violence against women in politics is a major obstacle to inclusive governance, human rights and sustainable development. Women leaders often face harassment, intimidation and abuse that discourage their participation and violate their rights. These actions also harm democratic institutions and reduce public trust.

This publication supports Sustainable Development Goal 16, highlighting the importance of effective and accountable institutions and inclusive decision-making at all levels. Parliaments play a crucial role by legislating, overseeing government actions, allocating resources and representing communities. As stated in the UNDP Strategic Plan, 2026–2029, ensuring women’s safe and equal participation in politics is essential for strong, trustworthy governance. However, many parliaments still lack adequate policies and an embedded culture to prevent and address gender-based violence internally.

This publication, *Addressing violence against women in politics: Institutional responses and good practices by parliaments*, offers practical evidence and guidance on how parliaments address violence against women in politics. It reviews institutional measures, showcases emerging good practices and presents case studies from diverse contexts demonstrating the potential for impactful reform through sustained effort.

Crucially, the examples presented in the publication show that tackling violence against women in politics is vital not only for workplace conduct but also a prerequisite for functioning democracy. When women face exclusion or threats in politics, institutional credibility declines. Parliaments with clear standards, independent reporting, survivor-focused procedures, and strong accountability help protect members and set democratic norms.

The UNDP remains committed to supporting parliaments, practitioners and partners in advancing gender equality and strengthening democratic institutions. We hope this resource will help parliaments – and country offices working with them – to review existing practices, identify reform opportunities and implement measures for safe, inclusive and equitable political participation.



Marcos Neto

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Assistant Administrator and Director, Bureau
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United Nations Development Programme

Foreword from the IPU

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is delighted to partner with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to publish this research document, *Addressing violence against women in politics: Institutional responses and good practices by parliaments*.

This publication is a testament to the long-standing partnership between the IPU and the UNDP, united by a shared commitment to supporting the elimination of violence against women in political life.

The IPU has long been committed to supporting parliaments in becoming gender-sensitive institutions that fully uphold women's rights and promote equal participation in political life. Ensuring that parliaments are safe, inclusive and respectful workplaces is a central component of this commitment. Over the years, the IPU has worked closely with parliaments and partners to document, analyse and address violence against women in parliaments.

Violence against women in politics is not only a violation of fundamental human rights, it is also a direct threat to democratic governance. When women are subjected to harassment, intimidation or abuse because of their political role, their ability to participate fully and influence decision-making is undermined. Such violence discourages women from entering or remaining in political life and weakens the diversity and legitimacy of representative institutions.

Parliaments, as both political arenas and workplaces, have a particular responsibility to address these challenges. By adopting effective policies, procedures and support mechanisms, they can help protect the rights and well-being of their members and staff, set clear standards of conduct and demonstrate leadership in promoting gender equality in public life.

This publication seeks to shed light on how parliaments are responding to gender-based violence within their own workplaces and to provide practical guidance for further action.

The objectives of this publication are threefold. First, it aims to identify and categorize the main types of institutional responses that parliaments have designed to address violence against women in parliamentary settings. Second, it documents a range of good practices drawn from different regional and political contexts, illustrating how these measures have been implemented in practice. Third, it seeks to provide actionable recommendations that can support parliaments, practitioners and development partners in strengthening institutional frameworks, policies and practices to prevent and address violence against women in politics.

Through the examples and analysis presented in this publication, we hope to support parliaments in reflecting on their own practices and identifying practical entry points for reform.

The IPU remains committed to working with parliaments and partners around the world to advance women's equal participation in political life and to ensure that democratic institutions are safe, inclusive and respectful environments for all.



Martin Chungong

IPU Secretary General

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1. Introduction

After a 20th century marked by a progressive women's movement and significant strides towards gender equality, the reversal of these hard-won gains is no longer a distant threat but an emerging reality.

Across the world, the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women is not only stagnating but, in some cases, declining, even in countries with gender quotas and progressive legislation.¹ This trend should serve as a wake-up call to politicians, practitioners and pundits alike: inclusive leadership is an ongoing project. When parliaments fail to ensure women's equal and meaningful participation, the fallout is swift and profound, harming individuals, weakening institutional trust and eroding the democratic benefits of diverse representation. At a time when democratic institutions are grappling with a crisis of confidence, political violence threatens to both suppress engagement and weaken representation, putting the legitimacy of the democratic system at risk.² As employers and standard-setters, parliaments must ensure safe and inclusive workplaces, protecting their members and staff and fostering conditions that promote meaningful political participation.

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) is an urgent challenge that undermines women's full participation in political institutions and their ability to influence and equally take part in decision-making. Harassment and violence in parliaments are widespread and systemic, and have evolved alongside women's growing political presence, with the backlash often intensifying as a response from those resisting shifts toward gender equality.³ VAWP can take many forms – physical, psychological, sexual, economic, cultural and, increasingly, digital, and is perpetrated, instigated or amplified both within broader society,

including online spaces,⁴ and within parliamentary workplaces by members of the institutions themselves.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has made substantial strides in documenting the prevalence of VAWP. Its findings reveal that 75% of women parliamentarians that responded to the survey on sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Asia and the Pacific, 80% in Africa and 85% in Europe have experienced psychological violence. Among parliamentary staff who have responded to the survey, 36% in the Asia-Pacific region, 46% in Africa and 41% in Europe reported experiencing sexual violence in the workplace. Notably, the prevalence of psychological violence among parliamentary staff is even higher and increases across all regions – 63% of women parliamentary staff surveyed in the Asia-Pacific region, 69% in Africa and 52% in Europe had experienced psychological violence.⁵ ParlAmericas, for instance, offers an interactive platform tracking how legislatures in the Latin America and Caribbean region implement internal practices to enhance gender responsiveness.⁶ Yet, despite growing evidence, there has been little systematic analysis of how parliaments are responding and what measures they adopt, how effectively they work in practice, and under what institutional and political conditions they take root.

1 International IDEA, *2024 Elections Super-Cycle: A Key Moment for Gender Equality?*, 2024; and UN-Women, *Why so few women are in political leadership, and five actions to boost women's political participation, 2024*.

2 OECD, *Trust in government*, n.d.

3 Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, *"Revenge of the Patriarchs: Why Autocrats Fear Women"*, Foreign Affairs, 2022.

4 Atenea por una democracia 50/50 mechanism (UNDP, UN-Women and International IDEA), *Violencia contra las mujeres en política: hoja de ruta para prevenirla, monitorearla, sancionarla y erradicarla*, 2020; and International IDEA, *Violencia política de género en la esfera digital en América Latina*, 2024.

5 IPU issue briefs, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in the Asia-Pacific region*, 2025; IPU issue briefs, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Africa*, 2021; and IPU issue briefs, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe*, 2018.

6 ParlAmericas, *Institutional Progress on Gender Equality in the Parliaments of the Americas and the Caribbean*, 2025.

This research seeks to fill that gap. Its aim is to produce a practical knowledge product to guide the development of policy options and support strategies for practitioners, including, but not limited to, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) country offices. It may also serve as a valuable resource for parliamentarians, parliamentary committees and caucuses seeking to curb gender-based violence in parliaments and in politics, by informing their actions and guiding reform initiatives.

The study has three key objectives: to identify and categorize the main types of institutional responses; to document good practices for each category, drawing on regional diversity; and to provide actionable recommendations on policy standards and entry points for parliamentary action and institutional reform. The project is firmly grounded in the UNDP's governance and gender equality objectives, as well as its broader strategic plan.

Psychological violence - Women parliamentarians

75%
of women
parliamentarians in
Asia and the Pacific

80%
of women
parliamentarians
in Africa

85%
of women
parliamentarians
in Europe

Sexual violence in the workplace - Women Parliamentary staff

36%
of women
parliamentarians in
the Asia-Pacific region

41%
of women
parliamentarians
in Europe

46%
of women
parliamentarians
in Africa

Psychological violence - Women Parliamentary staff

52%
of women
parliamentarians
in Europe

63%
of women
parliamentarians in
the Asia-Pacific region

69%
of women
parliamentarians in
Africa

2. Typology of institutional responses

Institutional responses to VAWP take many forms and vary along several key dimensions, reflecting varying degrees of appetite and readiness for change. One important dimension is their **scope and target group**: some focus solely on women parliamentarians, while others include all parliamentary members and staff.

Including parliamentary staff is crucial because they often face distinct risks and have historically been excluded from protections, leaving them vulnerable and without adequate recourse. Another dimension is their **temporal focus**: some mechanisms are preventative, aiming to stop violence before it occurs; others focus on sanctions, holding perpetrators accountable after incidents; and still others are supportive, providing assistance and care to survivors during and after such events. **Accountability** also differs. Responsibility for enforcement and oversight may lie with internal parliamentary bodies, independent commissions or external actors. Finally, these mechanisms vary in their **degree of institutionalization**. While institutionalized responses are preferred over ad hoc or individual efforts, reflecting the understanding that ensuring a safe working environment is a core institutional responsibility, practices still differ widely in how embedded and systematic they are. **This study focuses on measures that address harassment and violence arising primarily within the parliamentary workplace, rather than VAWP more broadly in society.** At the same time, it is important to recognize that institutional measures do not stand alone: they often emerge alongside and are complemented by wider societal efforts that address the broader drivers and manifestations of VAWP. Several of these society-wide measures are reflected in the case studies, illustrating how the two can reinforce one another.

This section presents a typology of institutional measures, outlining 10 distinct types of responses to gender-based violence in parliaments. It illustrates the range of actions that can be taken to promote more inclusive, safe and gender-sensitive political institutions. The typology was developed through a review of

existing research and intentionally structured around measures that have been implemented and observed across diverse parliamentary contexts. This emphasis on existing practices enables an assessment of how these measures function in practice and supports the formulation of recommendations firmly grounded in parliamentary realities.

While many initiatives do not fit neatly into a single category, and some reflect the reality that responses often evolve through a combination of efforts over time, the aim is to clarify how diverse types of support relate to, reinforce and complement one another. Their effectiveness, however, may vary depending on the context. These measures range from awareness-raising, which lays essential groundwork by fostering recognition of problems and shifting norms, to more resource- and commitment-intensive approaches such as legislative reform, which demand deeper institutional engagement. Each plays a distinct and necessary role in addressing the complex challenge of VAWP.

To illustrate these nuances as concretely as possible, this section includes case studies for each measure, showing how different responses have been implemented in practice and highlighting the supportive role of external actors such as the UNDP. These examples are not meant to serve as perfect models; rather, their value lies in showing how different approaches navigate real world trade-offs, constraints and ongoing learning. These are challenges that all parliaments and practitioners must contend with. While they cannot fully capture the depth of commitment and innovation demonstrated by parliaments and their partners, these examples are intended to spark reflection, inform prospective approaches to addressing VAWP, and offer insights into what contributes to meaningful and lasting change.

2.1 Self-regulation practices

As a separate branch of government, parliaments are usually given powers to manage their own internal human resource management and occupational health and safety issues. This is a crucial element of ensuring parliamentary independence. Conversely, the result has been that many parliaments have insufficient legal and policy safeguards in place to protect members of parliament (MPs) and staff from violence or harassment. In recent years, as parliamentarians have begun to discuss threats and actions of violence, bullying and harassment more openly, there has been a greater push to ensure that there are proper protective mechanisms in place for parliamentarians, their political staff and parliamentary service staff.

Self-regulation refers to internal protocols and policies adopted by parliaments to guide the conduct of legislative processes and parliamentary actors. As defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it is a “recent governance mechanism with increasing importance in the mitigation of governance challenges”⁷. Unlike laws, self-regulatory practices are not legally binding and tend to be more flexible in their application, although they are often accompanied by reporting, complaints and sanctioning mechanisms that strengthen their impact. These aspects are expanded on in the following section. Self-regulation measures take various forms. In the context of VAWP, they include internal sexual harassment policies, codes of conduct and ethics frameworks designed to foster a safe and respectful working environment within parliament.

The IPU Guidelines for the *elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament*⁸ offer detailed advice and practical tools for designing and implementing such policies. They outline steps for mobilizing political will, assessing existing frameworks, collecting data and enshrining standards in institutional policies.⁹ These recommendations underscore the importance of leadership commitment and institutional readiness, key factors that directly influence the success of self-regulation efforts. Adopting self-regulation requires political will,

not only to formally introduce new policies, but also to embed them in institutional practice. These measures do not generate awareness, trust or uptake overnight. However, where leadership invests sustained effort, self-regulation can become a powerful tool for institutionalizing equality efforts. Political leaders seeking to advance the gender equality agenda could, for example, consider establishing a sexual harassment protocol, as doing so not only begins the process of a cultural shift but also provides the institutional infrastructure necessary to sustain that shift over time.

Mexico’s Senate and Chamber of Deputies illustrate the non-linear path of institutional reform. Their experiences show that progress rarely comes all at once, but through trial, revision and persistent leadership commitment.

7 OECD, *State-Owned Enterprise Governance: A Stocktaking of Government Rationales for Enterprise Ownership*, 2015; and Ulf Papenfuß and Christian A. Schmidt, “Understanding self-regulation for political control and policymaking: Effects of governance mechanisms on accountability”, *Governance*, 34/4 (2021), 1115–1141.

8 IPU, *Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament*, 2019.

9 Ibid.



Mexico

Mexico's senate: from fragmentation to integration

Before 2019, Mexico's Senate addressed VAWP through two separate frameworks, a protocol to prevent, address and punish sexual harassment and guidelines on workplace harassment.¹⁰ Operating independently, these frameworks caused confusion, scattered responsibilities, presented inconsistent criteria and led to uneven enforcement. This fragmentation hindered timely, clear responses and weakened trust in the system.

Rationale and reform approach

To address these challenges, the Senate consolidated its efforts into a single protocol centred on any victim of gender-based violence, regardless of whether or not the events constitute criminally classified conduct, designed to:

- ensure the care and support of persons who are victims of acts that may constitute crimes; in such cases, the corresponding referral is made to the competent authorities;
- clearly define roles and responsibilities for institutional actors to ensure effective follow-up;
- enhance staff capacity for professional, sensitive enforcement; and
- sustain continuous awareness-raising campaigns about the measures to increase visibility and encourage use.

As reflected in its name, *the Protocolo para la prevención, atención y sanción de la violencia de género al interior del Senado de la República* (protocol for the prevention, handling and punishment of gender-based violence within the Senate), adopts an integrated approach encompassing prevention, support and punishment. It emphasizes combining training and capacity-building with awareness-raising initiatives and enforcement measures to foster lasting change.¹¹

Key features of the new protocol

The following features may serve as useful reference points for others working to strengthen institutional responses to gender-based violence.

1

Well anchored

The protocol is firmly anchored in Mexico's national legislation and international commitments, clearly outlining how these legal obligations shape and justify its approach. It sets out specific objectives and is guided by core values such as good faith, due diligence, trauma-informed practices, gender sensitivity, impartiality and strict confidentiality. Together, these elements create a strong normative foundation, helping to bridge legal principles with day-to-day implementation. Importantly, this approach frames gender equality not as a women's issue alone, but as a cornerstone of constitutional democracy and institutional integrity.

¹⁰ Senado de la República, Mexico, *Protocolo para la prevención, atención y sanción de la violencia de género al interior del senado de la república senado*.

¹¹ <https://unidadgenero.senado.gob.mx/doc/publicaciones/ProtocoloCVG.pdf>

2

Preventative

Unlike protocols that focus primarily on reporting and sanctions, this protocol emphasizes cultural change and the internalization of gender equality principles, meaning the integration of these values into everyday practices and institutional norms. It mandates training and awareness-raising for all staff, commits to reviewing policies for gender bias, and requires regular assessments of prevention efforts, with provisions to intensify them if problems persist or deepen.

3

Clear responsibilities

The protocol clearly assigns responsibility for all elements, including training and evaluation. It standardizes processes to reduce confusion; in this regard, it falls in particular to the Internal Comptroller's Office to receive, investigate and follow up on administrative complaints and reports.

With regard to the Technical Unit for Gender Equality, it is the first point of contact in cases of gender-based violence within the Senate and, in the exercise of its powers, prepares a technical opinion within the first 10 working days following receipt of the account of events. This opinion is referred to the competent bodies (the Internal Comptroller's Office, the General Directorate of Legal Affairs, and the General Directorate of Human Resources) so that, in accordance with their respective powers, they may determine and implement the relevant measures.

It is important to highlight the significance of the technical opinion, as it constitutes a specialized instrument with a gender perspective that enables the competent bodies to be provided with technical elements for the proper analysis and handling of each case.

This document details the relevant circumstances and events that make it possible to demonstrate the probable existence of violence and/or discrimination within the Senate; recommendations for due diligence from a gender perspective; identification of needs, risk factors, safety conditions, care requirements, and the measures needed to address the situation; as well as recommendations to achieve the effective restoration of the victim's rights. It is prepared on the basis of interviews conducted with the victim, at all times seeking to avoid processes of re-victimization. Furthermore, the technical opinion is produced by staff specialized in gender and violence issues, which strengthens the institution's due diligence in the handling of cases. When collaboration is required, flowcharts and visual elements are used to clarify roles and procedures.

4

Oversight and monitoring

A cross-functional committee, bringing together representatives from the Senate Board, the Commission on Gender Equality, legal affairs, human resources, the Internal Comptroller and the technical unit for gender equality, meets on a quarterly basis to strengthen institutional responses to gender-based concerns. During these meetings, the committee tracks the number and nature of complaints received, reviews technical opinions issued and monitors compliance with recommendations. It also examines individual cases to identify recurring challenges and emerging best practices, using this feedback to continuously improve internal protocols and processes.

Evidence of impact

Since its adoption in 2019, the committee has helped clarify institutional roles, strengthen monitoring systems and sustain political commitment to gender equality within the Senate. In 2022, a second edition of the protocol was published, incorporating a visual flowchart to simplify the process and enhance accessibility. The continuity of committee meetings and the steady refinement of implementation practices point to a well-coordinated and functional system that has gained political relevance and visibility. Publicly available meeting reports confirm the active use of the complaints mechanism and reflect growing transparency and accountability, illustrating that the protocol is being applied in practice and shaping institutional responses to gender-based violence.



Lessons from Mexico's Senate and Chamber of Deputies

There is strong political will in Mexico to strengthen institutional responses to VAWP. As noted earlier, the Senate has recently consolidated several fragmented protocols into a more integrated framework. The Chamber of Deputies is also in the process of reforming its protocol on sexual violence and discrimination, generating valuable institutional reflection even as new guidelines are still being finalized. Drawing on experiences from both chambers and conversations with those involved in these ongoing reforms, the following considerations offer insights that may be helpful to other parliaments exploring ways to enhance their responses to VAWP.

1

Streamlining and Aligning Frameworks

Fragmented or overlapping policies on conduct, harassment, discrimination and workplace behaviour can create confusion for staff and leadership alike, complicating enforcement and consistent application. Reviewing and consolidating these policies into a clearer, more coherent framework may support more effective implementation.

2

Strengthening checks and balances

Internal enforcement mechanisms sometimes lack sufficient independence or authority to ensure accountability. Empowering gender units or similar bodies with clearer oversight roles and fostering collaboration across human resources, legal and political leadership could strengthen these checks and balances.

3

Addressing conflicts of interest

Oversight can be compromised when those responsible for enforcement are also involved in cases. Considering mechanisms to involve independent or ad hoc investigators or committees in such situations may help safeguard impartiality and maintain trust in the process.

4

Clarifying and enforcing limits of parliamentary privilege

Parliamentary privilege can shield harmful speech, posing challenges for addressing misconduct. Careful reflection is needed on defining behavioural standards that apply within privileged speech and on how ethics committees can address violations while respecting legislative independence.

5

Visualizing and simplifying procedures

Legal jargon and bureaucratic complexity can discourage engagement and make it difficult for people to understand their rights and options. Using plain language alongside visual aids, such as flowcharts or step-by-step guides, can improve clarity and help users navigate procedures more confidently. As one interviewee put it, "If a child cannot understand the guidelines, they are bad guidelines".

2.2 Complaints, reporting, and sanctions

Complaints and reporting mechanisms provide a formal process for addressing harassment, bullying, discrimination or gender-based violence within parliamentary institutions. They typically specify a person or body from whom individuals can seek support and advice, how complaints should be submitted and processed, and who holds responsibility for managing the procedure. Most systems outline key procedural elements, such as investigation timelines, roles and responsibilities, and criteria for decision-making, including potential sanctions or disciplinary measures, to ensure accountability when complaints are upheld.

Establishing such systems is complex, as parliaments often grapple with designing systems that may be required to hold themselves, as elected officials, to account for their conduct. For

such processes to be trusted and used, parliamentarians and staff must have confidence in their fairness and effectiveness. Their success may also depend on coordination across internal structures, particularly when responsibilities for reporting, investigation and sanctioning are divided among different units. In some contexts, complexity is further compounded by institutional arrangements, for example, when parliamentary staff are managed not by parliament itself but by an executive-branch public service authority. Australia recently created a complaints and reporting mechanism from the ground up, an ambitious effort that, while not without its challenges, offers useful lessons on how to initiate and build such systems.

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Honduran presidential candidate Xiomara Castro greets her supporters following the election on Sunday in Tegucigalpa.





Australia

Crisis as catalyst for reform

Concerns about gendered abuse in Australia's Federal Parliament reached breaking point in 2021, when parliamentary staffer Brittany Higgins publicly alleged that she had been raped inside Parliament House.¹² Her testimony sparked widespread public outrage and renewed pressure on parliament to take meaningful action.¹³ Australia has had a dedicated sex discrimination commissioner since 1984, as part of its Human Rights Commission framework.¹⁴ In response to the crisis, then commissioner Kate Jenkins was tasked by the Government to lead an independent review of parliamentary workplace culture.¹⁵

The resulting report *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Workplaces* exposed systemic issues, including bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination, and put forward 28 detailed recommendations to transform workplace norms, strengthen accountability and enhance safety.¹⁶ All major parties endorsed the report and committed to implementing its recommendations.¹⁷ A cross-party task force, comprising senior representatives from government, opposition and minor parties, as well as an independent MP, was established by the Government to guide and oversee the reform process. The group included ministers and shadow ministers responsible for portfolios such as women, finance, the public service and parliamentary standards, ensuring high-level political buy-in.¹⁸

From independent review to systemic change

A central recommendation was the creation of a robust complaints and reporting system. The fact that the recommendation came from an independent, public and clearly articulated proposal likely played a role in compelling parliament to pursue such an ambitious, high-effort reform. This underscores the strategic value of independent reviews in catalysing institutional change. The establishment of a dedicated, bipartisan task force to lead implementation and the decision to publish progress reports in 2023 and 2024, alongside a planned external independent evaluation in 2025, also likely contributed to the swift uptake of reforms.

Mechanism in practice: australia's independent reporting and support system

To address misconduct and gender-based harm in its parliamentary workplace, Australia established two independent mechanisms:

- **Parliamentary Workplace Support Service:** The Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (PWSS) is an independent human resources and support body, established to help drive cultural change across Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces.¹⁹ It offers a range of trauma-informed support and complaint resolution services, including counselling, mediation, referrals to specialized services and

¹² [News.co.au](#), "Young staffer Brittany Higgins says she was raped at Parliament House", 2021.

¹³ [BBC News](#), "[Brittany Higgins: Australian parliament makes formal apology to rape accuser](#)", 2022.

¹⁴ [Australian Human Rights Commission](#).

¹⁵ [The Guardian](#), "[Sex discrimination commissioner Kate Jenkins to lead review into parliament's workplace culture](#)", 2021.

¹⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Set the Standard: Report on the Independent Review into Workplaces*, 2021.

¹⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Parliament's improved workplace culture is an example for others*, 2023.

¹⁸ Parliament of Australia, *Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce*.

¹⁹ [The Parliamentary Workplace Support Service](#).

assistance with making police reports. The PWSS is accessible to all members of the parliamentary workplace, including both staff and parliamentarians.

→ **Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission:** The Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission (IPSC) is an independent body composed of non-parliamentarians, such as legal experts, former tribunal members and ombudspersons. It investigates formal misconduct complaints and recommends sanctions in accordance with new behavioural codes endorsed by parliament in 2024. While the IPSC's structural independence is intended to ensure neutrality and due process, there are limits to its authority: in serious cases of misconduct that involve MPs, final decisions rest with the parliamentary Privileges Committee, which is composed of sitting members.²⁰

Both mechanisms are intended to operate outside traditional party hierarchies and internal human resources systems. This independence is essential: it helps build trust across political lines, particularly in environments where loyalty, retaliation or reputational risk often deter individuals from coming forward.

Early results and ongoing challenges

The PWSS counselling and support team has experienced steadily increasing engagement since its inception, handling 121 cases in its first year (2021–2022), 411 in its second (2022–2023), and 339 cases between 1 October 2023 and 30 June 2024 alone. This upward trend reflects growing awareness of, and trust in, the service among both staff and parliamentarians. Most cases were resolved informally, with fewer than 10 in 2023–2024 progressing to formal complaints, underscoring the PWSS's role as a first point of contact and early intervention mechanism.

It is still quite early to evaluate the system's effectiveness, especially the IPSC, which only became operational in October 2024. However, individual cases highlight both the promise and limits of the new complaints and reporting infrastructure. Senator Fatima Payman, who reported sexually suggestive and racially insensitive comments from a male colleague, praised the PWSS for acting swiftly and making her feel supported.²¹ In contrast, Senator Lydia Thorpe expressed frustration after two unresolved complaints, one involving sexual harassment, the other bullying by former colleagues.²² In the latter case, the accused declined mediation and the complaint went no further, prompting Thorpe to describe the PWSS as “a dead end”. While emphasizing that her criticism was not aimed at staff, she argued the process “has no teeth”. She has since requested escalation to the IPSC but raised concerns that the Privileges Committee, which decides on IPSC cases, operates as a “protection racket” dominated by the major parties.

Senator Thorpe's case illustrates both why an independent enforcement body was needed and the tensions built into the current model. The IPSC fills a clear gap by taking on complaints that stall in the PWSS, which lacks powers to compel participation. But when referrals must still pass through a committee of sitting MPs, the system risks appearing politicized. Even if the Privileges Committee acts impartially, as members assert, its structure may still undermine perceptions of independence, something only consistent practice and transparency can restore over time.

20 *The Guardian*, “Jail threat could ‘gag’ whistleblowers going before Australian parliament’s new workplace watchdog, critics warn”, 2024.

21 *ABC News*, “Senator Fatima Payman discloses ‘inappropriate’ behaviour by senior parliamentary colleague”, 2025.

22 *The Guardian*, “Lidia Thorpe reveals she made bullying complaint about Dorinda Cox which remains unresolved”, 2025.

Reflections on design and durability

The Australian experience shows that, even in well-resourced institutions with strong, cross-partisan support, the process of establishing complaints and reporting systems is rarely straightforward. Early cases have revealed tensions that underscore the inherent difficulty of regulating conduct in political workplaces. Some of these challenges stem from specific design choices, such as Australia's decision to place only MPs on its Privileges Committee, unlike, for instance, the United Kingdom's more mixed model, which includes both MPs and external members. Still, no system can fully shield itself from institutional pressures, especially in its initial stages.

Yet, the foundation laid offers reason for cautious optimism. From the outset, the process included multiple internal and external review mechanisms, which have helped sustain political attention and ensure that shortcomings remain visible. Regular review points of the new process have reinforced cross-party commitment and created space to adjust and strengthen the system as new challenges arise, offering a path for continuous improvement over time.



Case-based reflections on designing effective complaints and reporting mechanisms in parliament

Based on case-study insight, for reporting mechanisms to work effectively, they must be supported by strong institutional ownership, a clear line of responsibility and well-defined standard operating procedures for their use.

When developing or improving a complaints mechanism, the following questions can be considered to ensure it is appropriate, trusted and effective:

1

Who is responsible for handling complaints?

Is the deciding body independent, diverse and equipped with the right expertise (for example, legal, administrative, gender, human rights)? Does it include parliamentarians, external actors, or a mix? What are the implications of that composition for trust and fairness?

2

Is the process accessible to all potential users?

Are both formal and informal reporting pathways available? Can complaints be submitted both online and in person? What steps are being taken to reduce barriers for marginalized or junior staff?

3

Is there an opportunity for whistleblowing or reporting as a witness?

Does the complaints system explicitly allow individuals who have witnessed misconduct, but were not personally abused, to come forward and report concerns?

4

Can the mechanism respond in a timely way?

Are there clear timelines for review and resolution? What safeguards are in place to avoid delays or backlogs that might discourage reporting?



5

Is there an opportunity for appeal or independent oversight?

Does the complaints process incorporate checks, such as a second-stage review or independent oversight, to enhance accountability and fairness? Could implementing a two-step structure, like Australia's model, help reinforce procedural integrity and reassure members against flawed or biased decisions?

6

How is confidentiality protected?

What specific measures ensure the privacy of complainants and reported individuals? Do users have confidence that information will not be leaked or misused?

7

Is the process shielded from political influence?

How is political neutrality maintained? If parliamentarians sit on the review body, are all parties (both majority and opposition) fairly represented? Are all complaints handled consistently, regardless of political affiliation or seniority?

8

How transparent is the mechanism to the public and to parliament?

Are anonymized statistics and outcomes of cases regularly published? How is transparency balanced with privacy and confidentiality?

9

How will people know about and trust the mechanism?

What communication strategies will ensure that MPs, staff and other stakeholders are aware of the mechanism and understand how to use it? Are training or briefings provided?

10

Is there a plan for ongoing monitoring and improvement?

Will the mechanism be independently reviewed at regular intervals? How will lessons learned or new challenges be incorporated into future reforms?

2.3 Legal reform

Legal reform refers to efforts by parliaments to recognize VAWP as a distinct and unacceptable form of harm. By formally defining this violence in law, such reforms seek to increase visibility, establish accountability and provide MPs with legal avenues for redress.

To date, only a few parliaments have addressed this issue through legislative reform. Where such reforms have been attempted, as in Bolivia and Kyrgyzstan, they have required strong political will and sustained alliances among key actors.



Plurinational State of Bolivia

Context and challenge

Women parliamentarians in Bolivia have long faced gender-based violence without meaningful institutional response. This lack of support has likely contributed to stagnating, and more recently declining, levels of women's political participation, despite Bolivia ranking second globally with over 50% representation of women. Women's organizations consistently criticized the Government for failing to uphold international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women (*Belém do Pará Convention*), as well as its 2009 constitutional reform guaranteeing women's right to live free from violence.²³ It was only after the 2012 murder of Juana Quispe, an indigenous municipal council member, and the subsequent national debate that parliament was compelled to act.²⁴

Entry points and drivers

The *Asociación de concejalas y alcaldesas de Bolivia* (Association of Women Councillors and Mayors of Bolivia, ACOBOL) had long advocated for legal recognition of VAWP.²⁵ Although Quispe's murder increased the urgency, ACOBOL had already commissioned a lawyer to draft a legislative proposal on VAWP back in 2004.²⁶ This sustained advocacy and coalition building appear to have played a pivotal role in prompting eventual parliamentary action.²⁷

First law to criminalize VAWP: Implementation and impact

Passed in May 2012, the *Ley N° 243 contra el acoso y violencia política hacia las mujeres* (Law No. 243 on harassment and political violence against women) became the world's first law to criminalize VAWP. It defines 17 distinct acts of political harassment and violence and sets criminal penalties ranging from two to five years in prison for harassment and three to eight years for political violence.

Implementation has been uneven.²⁸ ACOBOL and partners have documented hundreds of complaints, although most have not led to investigations or convictions. It has highlighted significant enforcement gaps and the limitations of legal reform without adequate institutional support, resources and awareness-raising.

Nevertheless, law no. 243 has been instrumental in making VAWP visible and inspiring similar reforms regionally.²⁹ By legally defining the forms of violence faced by women in political life, it laid the foundation for recognition, advocacy and cultural change. Recent developments suggest growing momentum: in 2024,

23 United Nations Office at Geneva, News & Media, "Committee On Elimination Of Discrimination against Women concludes fortieth session", 2008.

24 UN-Women, Americas and the Caribbean, *Across Latin America, women fight back against violence in politics*, 2018.

25 Carmen Alanis, *Violence Against Women in Politics*, Kofi Annan Foundation, 2020.

26 Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "Criminalizing Violence against Women in Politics: Innovation, Diffusion, and Transformation", *Politics & Gender*, 18 (2022), 1–32.

27 Sustainable Development Goals Fund, *Case Study: Institutional strengthening against gender-based political violence in Bolivia*, 2017.

28 The Carter Center, *BOLIVIA Fourth Periodic Report: NGO Submission to the U.N. Human Rights Committee*, 2022.

29 Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "The Law and Violence against Women in Politics", *Politics & Gender*, 14/4 (2017), 676–680.

ACOBOL reported a 68% positive case resolution rate with 30% of cases under review.³⁰ Two perpetrators were sentenced for politically motivated violence and final convictions were delivered in Juana Quispe's case, affirming that delayed accountability is possible.

Takeaways

Bolivia's experience underscores the critical role of sustained civil society advocacy in creating conditions for legal reform and turning high-profile cases into lasting change. It also demonstrates how leveraging national and international legal commitments can push systemic reform beyond awareness-raising. At the same time, the case highlights the challenges of addressing VAWP through legal channels in an under-resourced and overburdened judiciary, underscoring the need to pair legal reforms with advocacy campaigns and capacity-building.



Latin America and the Caribbean model law on violence against women in politics

Model laws serve as templates to guide legal drafting and harmonize standards on specific issues across countries. They assist legislators in reviewing or proposing bills and amendments by offering consistent legal and conceptual frameworks. In Latin America and the Caribbean, regional organizations such as ParlAmericas support these efforts by facilitating legislative dialogue and promoting best practices on gender equality and human rights.

The Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women in Political Life, launched in 2017 by the Follow-up Mechanism to the *Belém do Pará Convention*, provides a comprehensive framework for addressing VAWP.³³ Drawing on definitions from the Inter-American convention, it covers physical, sexual, psychological, economic and symbolic violence in both public and private spheres. It affirms women's rights to participate in political and public life free from violence and outlines state obligations to prevent, sanction and eradicate such violence through legislative and institutional reforms.

The development and promotion of this model law exemplify parliamentary diplomacy and regional collaboration, fostering shared standards and mutual support among parliaments committed to advancing gender equality in political life.

Currently, 15 countries in the region have enacted legislation on gender-based political violence: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. Seven countries have specific laws; 10 countries have incorporated the concept into their comprehensive gender-based violence laws; and four countries address violence against women in politics through electoral legislation and political institutions. However, not all of these legal instruments include clear provisions for sanctions against perpetrators or reparations for victims, highlighting ongoing gaps in enforcement and victim-support mechanisms.³⁴

30 ACOBOL (Centro de Atención y Monitoreo de Acoso y Violencia Política), *BOLETÍN INFORMATIVO GESTIÓN 2024*, n.d.

31 OAS-MESECVI, *Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women in Political Life*, 2017.

32 FLASCO-ONU Mujeres, *Violencia contra las mujeres en política: marcos regulatorios de implementación en América Latina y el Caribe*, 2025.



Kyrgyzstan

Context and challenge

Political turbulence and strong partisanship in Kyrgyzstan mean limited opportunities for women to organize across party lines or push collectively for institutional change.³³ Under such conditions, legislative reform, which requires broad coalitions and buy-in, might seem an unlikely path to address VAWP. Yet, Kyrgyzstan has made notable progress in recent years, especially in advancing legal protections against workplace sexual harassment.

Building awareness and cross-party trust

A key turning point came in 2013 with the adoption of Kyrgyzstan's first national action plan on United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security.³⁴ The national action plan created structured opportunities for women MPs to meet, reflect on shared challenges and identify priorities.³⁵ These meetings helped build trust across party lines, enable parliamentary champions, cultivate ownership of the agenda, and gradually shift internal norms. Supported by actors such as the UNDP, the Forum of Women MPs emerged as a vital cross-party platform that elevated VAWP as a legitimate and urgent concern.³⁶

Working closely with the Gender Policy Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Development and civil society groups, the forum developed a road map for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 and a joint parliamentary action plan, which was later endorsed by the broader parliament. These efforts built awareness, secured political buy-in, and established institutional mechanisms for collaboration. A three-year spotlight initiative project led by the Government, the European Union and the United Nations further raised the profile of gender-based violence.³⁷

Legislative reform

This groundwork was critical when MP Elvira Surabaldieva, motivated in part by her own experience of assault, championed sexual harassment legislation.³⁸ Inspired by a visit to Georgia, where similar reforms had been adopted, she pursued comparable changes in Kyrgyzstan.³⁹

While initial efforts targeted Labour Code amendments, the movement strategically shifted to advocate for ratifying ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). This approach aimed at mainstreaming protection across the entire legal and institutional framework rather than confining them to employment law. In June 2024, Kyrgyzstan became the first country in the region to ratify Convention No. 190, a significant milestone.⁴⁰ Parliament, again supported by the UNDP and partners, are now working to integrate the convention into national laws and policies.⁴¹

33 *openDemocracy*, "Polarisation grows as Kyrgyzstan tackles controversial corruption issues", 2019.

34 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, *National Action Plan (NAP) for the period 2022–2024*; and *Peacewomen.org*.

35 UN-Women, *Report on United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 and its implementation In Kyrgyzstan*, 2020.

36 UNDP, *Forum of Women MPs champions gender-sensitive response to COVID-19*, 2020.

37 Delegation of the European Union to the Kyrgyz Republic, *EU-UN Spotlight initiative shows promising results on ending violence against women and girls and calls for sustained action building on achievements*, 2023.

38 RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service "Kyrgyz Lawmaker Says She Was Sexually Harassed In Parliament Elevator", 2018.

39 UNDP Kyrgyzstan, "Women should achieve 10 times more" - Elvira Surabaldieva, 2022.

40 ILO Newsroom, *Kyrgyzstan ratifies the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention*, 2019 (No. 190), 2024.

41 ILO Newsroom, *Kyrgyz Parliament and ILO collaborate to implement the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment*, 2024.

Cultural and legislative synergies

Kyrgyzstan's experience highlights the close interplay between cultural change and legislative reform. Women MPs report a markedly different parliamentary culture compared to a decade ago, one in which support for women's issues is increasingly met with solidarity rather than mockery. This shift was not spontaneous; it depended on internal protocols that raised awareness, built trust and fostered cross-party coalitions. While it is still too early to fully assess the impact of the new legislation, ratifying Convention No. 190 represents a significant step forward, demonstrating that sustained advocacy and organizing is beginning to pay off.

Reflections on legal reform

Legal reform represents one of the most ambitious institutional responses to VAWP. It signals formal recognition and commitment but also demands sustained advocacy, legal expertise, strategic political navigation and effective implementation capacity.

However, laws alone do not guarantee change. Without accompanying training, enforcement mechanisms and genuine political will, reforms risk becoming largely symbolic. For legal change to be effective, it must be integrated into a broader strategy that embraces cultural transformation, coalition building and sustained public engagement.



Case-informed guidance: Practical questions to initiate legal reform on violence against women in politics

1

Engagement with civil society

- Which local civil society organizations are actively addressing GBV or women's political rights? Have any of them put forth concrete proposals for reform that could be built on?
- Are these groups connected to parliamentarians? If not, how can parliamentarians be linked with them to leverage their expertise and proposals?
- What specific concerns or barriers has parliament expressed, and how can civil society help design targeted advocacy to overcome them?

2

Coalition building among women parliamentarians and leadership engagement

- What existing networks or caucuses for women MPs can be mobilized to discuss VAWP?
- If none exist, how can you organize an initial meeting or forum to begin this conversation? What is the current level of awareness, and would awareness-raising or capacity-building workshops be beneficial to share knowledge and build relationships?
- Which party leaders, committee chairs or parliamentary authorities need to be briefed and engaged to secure their support?

- Who among women and men MPs has shown interest or leadership potential on gender equality, and how can they be encouraged to champion this issue beyond one-off events?
- What activities or spaces can be created to build trust and foster collaboration among these actors?

3

Leveraging laws, conventions, and regional examples

- Has the country ratified key international or regional conventions related to VAWP?
- If so, where are the gaps between commitments and implementation, and how can these be documented and communicated to build pressure for reform?
- If not, what are the necessary steps and key actors required to initiate the ratification process?
- Are there neighbouring countries or regional partners that have recently ratified relevant treaties whose experiences could be shared to build support? Are there existing model laws, such as those developed by regional bodies, which could serve as foundations for national legislation?

2.4 Training and capacity development

Training and capacity development initiatives equip parliamentarians and staff to advance gender equality by raising awareness, strengthening technical capacity and fostering institutional accountability. These efforts may include sessions for MPs on identifying and addressing persistent gender inequalities, as well as targeted support for bodies tasked with

enforcing gender policies. Crucially, such training initiatives also help shift discriminatory social norms and enable the cultural change needed for reforms to take hold. By building awareness and buy-in, they bridge the gap between formal commitments and everyday practices, ensuring more effective use of the measures highlighted in this report.

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The Chairperson of Rwanda's National Commission
for Human Rights speaking at the 12th ICC International Conference, Merida.





Canada

Background and motivation

In 2018, reports of harassment within the Senate of Canada revealed deeper issues with a toxic workplace culture, prompting both public and internal demands for change.⁴² To shape reforms, the Senate's Subcommittee on Human Resources conducted two months of hearings with expert witnesses and staff. These consultations highlighted the need for a proactive, institution-wide approach to creating a harassment-free environment, identifying broad mandatory training as the key response to cultural challenges. Chaired by Senator Raymonde Saint-Germain, the subcommittee recommended that all senators, their office staff and senate administration complete mandatory anti-harassment training. This recommendation received broad cross-party support and was rapidly adopted and institutionalized.

Design and implementation

The Senate developed its mandatory harassment and violence prevention training with external consultancy support to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognize, prevent and respond effectively to all forms of harassment. A revised policy on harassment and violence prevention was approved by the Senate in February 2021. The objective was to ensure the Senate is a workplace where everyone is treated with respect, fairness and dignity. The revised policy includes a resolution process with independent oversight and strict timelines and codifies the requirement for harassment and violence prevention training for all senators and Senate employees.

*Key features of the training programme include:*⁴³

- **Mandatory participation:** All Senators, Senate employees, students, interns, volunteers and contractors must complete training within three months of appointment or hiring, ensuring early engagement with the Senate's standards.
- **Role-specific modules:** Training content is customized to address the unique responsibilities and challenges of senators, managers and general staff, making the learning relevant and practical for each group.
- **Regular refresher courses:** Mandatory refresher sessions every three years reinforce knowledge, update participants on evolving policies, and sustain a culture of respect and awareness.
- **Comprehensive content:** The curriculum covers the Senate's harassment and violence prevention policy, the legal context under Part II of the Canada Labour Code and Canadian Human Rights Act, and actionable strategies for recognizing, preventing and responding to harassment and workplace violence.
- **Interactive learning:** The programme incorporates engaging methods such as bystander intervention training, role-playing and scenario-based exercises to deepen understanding and build practical skills.

⁴² CBC News, "Senate to implement mandatory harassment training for all senators, staff", 2018.

⁴³ Senate of Canada, *Modernizing the Senate's anti-harassment policy: Together let's protect our healthy workplace*, 2019; and Senate of Canada, *Senate Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy*, 2021.

- **Accountability through tracking:** Participation is monitored and recorded by name, creating clear responsibility and encouraging compliance across the institution.
- **Enforcement and oversight:** The Chief Human Resources Officer ensures compliance with training requirements as well as the completion of a workplace risk assessment and policy review every three years, while the Senate’s Subcommittee on the Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration Committee (CIBA) manages ongoing content updates and quality control.

Participation and impact

From the outset, the programme achieved exceptionally high levels of engagement. In its initial rollout, 103 out of 105 senators participated in the training, along with all 38 of the Senate’s administrative leaders and 96% of staff.⁴⁴ The initiative was described not only as a success in terms of attendance but, more importantly, as “a success in terms of the learning and the better awareness we have all benefited from”.⁴⁵

In 2021–2022, the Senate expanded its efforts, delivering 14 in-person, three-hour sessions on preventing harassment and violence, reaching all members of the 44th Parliament.⁴⁶ To supplement these sessions, an online, self-paced course was made available, with strong completion rates: all 227 senators and 535 of their employees completed the module. Beyond formal training, the Senate organized additional briefing sessions and awareness-raising activities, further embedding a culture of respect, accountability and institutional learning.

Broader parliamentary context: House of Commons perspective

In parallel to the Senate’s institutionalization of mandatory anti-harassment training, the House of Commons has pursued its own trajectory in addressing workplace culture and misconduct.

In 2021, MPs became subject to Bill C-65, bringing them under the application of Part II of the Canada Labour Code. As a result, and following adoption by the Board of Internal Economy in 2021 (with a review every three years), the Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy was established. The policy outlines the responsibilities of members of parliament as distinct employers and sets clear expectations for maintaining a healthy, safe and respectful workplace free from harassment and violence.

The policy is supported by a range of practical tools, mandatory training programmes, and the expertise of a dedicated team responsible for prevention, guidance and response. Together, these measures ensure that members and their employees are not only aware of their obligations but are also equipped and supported to meet them.

Additionally, members of parliament are governed by the Code of Conduct for Sexual Harassment, which addresses member-to-member conduct and establishes clear standards of behaviour for interactions between MPs. At the beginning of each parliament, members are required to formally affirm their commitment to the Code by signing a pledge, reinforcing accountability and leadership by example at the highest level of the organization.

Furthermore, during the last parliament, the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs initiated a review of the Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy in 2024.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Canadian Study of Parliament Group, *Addressing Violence and Harassment in Canada’s Senate: Critical Actors and Institutional Responses*, 2021.

⁴⁵ *The Hill Times*, “Senators’ anti-harassment training a ‘success,’ says Sen. Saint-Germain, as new policy steams ahead in Upper Chamber”, 2019.

⁴⁶ OSCE-ODIHR, *Addressing Violence against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region Toolkit Tool 2: Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments*, 2022.

⁴⁷ House of Commons of Canada (Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs), *Review of the Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy*, 2024.

Unlike the Senate’s centralized approach, the House of Commons operates through multiple administrative bodies and jurisdictions, reflecting the unique and complex nature of governance on Parliament Hill where no single, overarching system governs all parliamentary actors. This fragmentation has resulted in uneven policy coverage. For instance, while the reviewed policy provides guidance for MPs in their role as employers of staff the Code of Conduct addresses member-to-member interactions, ensuring expectations are tailored to different working relationships. Although policy frameworks may differ in scope, the prevention and support resources in place are available to all individuals on the Hill, ensuring consistent access to guidance, assistance and recourse regardless of role or jurisdiction. A study exploring the feasibility of a more comprehensive harassment policy that includes member-to-member interactions led only to the development of a sexual harassment framework.⁴⁸

Significant efforts have also been made to strengthen training and awareness. Mandatory training is in place for both members and their employees, with full completion achieved among members in the current parliament, demonstrating strong commitment. In addition, onboarding sessions on codes of conduct and workplace policies are provided for new members, and these training sessions are refreshed regularly to remain relevant and effective. They are complemented by both informal feedback mechanisms, such as liaison officers, and formal channels, including voluntary surveys. The lack of mechanisms remains an issue for some, and the absence of consistent consequences for misconduct has been identified by some as a barrier to cultural change. That said, others note that informal mechanisms can be equally successful in addressing issues without putting individuals through formal, and sometimes challenging, procedures. Ongoing focus on training, tools and support is key to translating these efforts into sustained behavioural impact.

Parliamentary privilege presents a unique challenge in this context. While freedom of speech is foundational to democratic debate, it can blur the boundaries between vigorous discourse and harmful conduct. This tension is particularly evident during Question Period , where performative exchanges designed for social media amplification often escalate into inflammatory rhetoric. Parliamentarians increasingly face challenges related to online behaviour and digital harassment, highlighting the limitations of current institutional mechanisms in addressing conduct occurring on social media platforms. Given that Speakers do not hold jurisdiction over online activity, managing these issues remains complex and creates gaps in how concerns can be addressed within existing governance frameworks.

Despite these challenges, there are signs of progress. Members have begun to call out inappropriate behaviour, and the House administration has implemented internal policies for staff. Training efforts have expanded and while the mechanisms for feedback and continuous improvement are still evolving, they reflect a growing recognition of the need for institutional learning and accountability.

⁴⁸ House of Commons of Canada, *Members of the House of Commons Workplace Harassment and Violence Prevention Policy, approved by the Board of Internal Economy, 2024.*



Uganda

Context and challenge

Uganda’s political landscape has long been shaped by patriarchal norms, with women parliamentarians often facing systemic barriers to participation and influence. Despite these challenges, Uganda’s women MPs have demonstrated that strategic alliances, both across party lines and with male allies, can be a powerful tool for institutional change. The Uganda Women Parliamentary Association (UWOPA),⁴⁹ a cross-party caucus, has been central to these efforts, leveraging its platform to advance gender-sensitive legislation and build capacity among MPs.

Established during Uganda’s 5th Parliament (1989–1994), UWOPA is a registered parliamentary caucus comprising all women members of parliament. Male MPs are eligible to join as associate members, although their participation is optional and subject to individual enrolment. It operates through a rotating leadership structure, with standing committees focused on legal reform, gender budgeting and public outreach. The caucus serves as a platform for advocacy, legislative engagement and capacity-building, aiming “to ensure engendered laws, policies, political processes and equality in resource allocation to improve the quality of life of women through effective representation, capacity building, political support and networking ”.⁵⁰

Training as a strategy

UWOPA’s approach to training and capacity development is notable for its emphasis on coalition building and legislative literacy. Rather than focusing solely on technical skills, UWOPA has prioritized political strategy, training women MPs to learn about and navigate parliamentary procedures, build alliances and advocate for gender equality and women’s empowerment. These training initiatives have included mock debates, legislative drafting workshops and strategic communications sessions, often facilitated in partnership with civil society organizations and international development actors. Additionally, UWOPA has organized training sessions and retreats for women MPs to discuss the challenges they face, including harassment and intimidation in parliamentary settings. These sessions have included scrutiny and communications training, which allow MPs to share experiences and build resilience.⁵¹

Training sessions have led to measurable outcomes, including increased sponsorship of gender bills, improved media engagement by women MPs and greater participation in parliamentary debates. These outcomes have not only been self-reported through post-training surveys but also tracked through monitoring conducted by civil society partners.

49 [Uganda Women Parliamentary Association \(UWOPA\)](#).

50 Ibid.

51 Government of Uganda, “[UGANDA’S INPUT FOR THE UN SECRETARY GENERAL’S REPORT, 2022-2024](#)”, n.d.

Integrated capacity-building

A key strength of UWOPA has been linking its capacity-building directly to ongoing legislative priorities. For example, in the lead-up to the passage of the Succession (Amendment) Act ⁵² and the Employment (Amendment) Bill ⁵³ in 2022, UWOPA organized targeted briefings and workshops to equip MPs with the legal and political arguments needed to champion reform. These bills addressed gender discrimination in inheritance and workplace protections against sexual harassment.

The sessions run by UWOPA were open to both women and men MPs, reinforcing the idea that gender equality is a shared responsibility. The result was an exemplary moment of cross-gender parliamentary unity, with male MPs supporting reforms that had long been stalled. These efforts are often supported by civil society organizations and international partners, including the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the Spotlight Initiative,⁵⁴ and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

These efforts reflect a distinctive model of internally led reform, with Uganda's MPs, particularly through UWOPA, driving gender-responsive governance from within parliament. Training sessions for women MPs, supported by civil society and development partners, have equipped both new and experienced parliamentarians to champion reform. This approach fosters cross-party collaboration, informal mentorship and shared ownership of gender equality as a priority.

Lessons learned

Uganda's experience offers several insights for parliaments seeking to strengthen institutional responses to VAWP through training and capacity development:

- **Coalition-based training** can enhance political impact by aligning skill building with strategic goals.
- **Cross-gender engagement** in training sessions helps normalize gender equality as a core institutional value.
- **Linking training to legislative milestones** ensures that capacity development is not abstract but directly tied to parliamentary outcomes.

These lessons underscore the importance of designing training programmes that are politically grounded, inclusive and action-oriented, qualities that have helped UWOPA sustain momentum and secure tangible reforms in a challenging political environment.

Conclusion

Uganda's experience demonstrates how institutional mechanisms like UWOPA can contribute to addressing violence against women in politics, not only through legal reform but by fostering cultural change within parliament. By embedding gender equality into legislative processes and creating safe spaces for women MPs to build skills and solidarity, UWOPA helps challenge the norms and power structures that enable political violence. Its model shows that capacity development, when paired with inclusive advocacy and coalition building, can serve as a quiet but powerful institutional response to VAWP, one that strengthens resilience, accountability and the democratic legitimacy of parliamentary institutions.

52 Parliament of Uganda, Acts Supplement No. 3, 2022.

53 Parliament of Uganda, Employment (Amendment) Bill, 2023.

54 UN-Women, *"Ending violence against women in Uganda takes a step forward with critical law reforms passed in Parliament"*, 2021.



Philippines

Institutionalizing gender sensitivity and anti-harassment training in parliament

The House of Representatives (HRep) of the Philippines offers a compelling example of institutional commitment to gender-sensitive capacity development. As part of its broader Gender and Development Focal Point System, the HRep has launched a comprehensive initiative to equip all members and parliamentary staff (over 2,000 individuals) with foundational training on gender sensitivity and mechanisms for addressing harassment and discrimination. This initiative includes the use of comic strips, such as the *Bawal Bastos* series, as part of an internal awareness campaign, creatively designed to encourage staff to recognize and speak out against abuse, discrimination and harassment. A training-of-trainers programme is under way to build in-house capacity for delivering interactive sessions, ensuring sustainability and institutional ownership. A total of 51 officials and employees have graduated from the programme. To date, at least 35% of all employees have been trained by in-house trainers. The sessions enhanced awareness and understanding of gender and development concepts, enabling participants to be more responsive to gender-specific needs and issues in the workplace.

The parliament drew on guidance developed by UN entities, such as the United Nations System Staff College's *Prevention and Response to Sexual Harassment – Successful Training Recipe*,⁵⁵ for the design and delivery of these sessions, ensuring that they are survivor-centred, participatory and grounded in international best practices.

To eliminate bias, discrimination and stereotyping in legislative documents, the HRep launched the *Inclusive Voices* publication. This aims to promote and standardize the use of gender-fair language (GFL) in their documents. This was also complemented with the conduct of GFL training, which allowed participants to gain a deeper understanding of the principles and importance of GFL, as well as practical strategies for applying it in communications.

Complementing these efforts, the House established the Committee on Decorum and Investigation in 2020 to handle complaints of harassment and gender-based violence. The committee is composed of seven members, primarily women, and includes representatives from both management and staff. It investigates cases and presents comprehensive reports with recommendations to the Disciplinary Board, which determines the appropriate administrative sanction, ranging from fines or suspension to dismissal. For cases involving House members, the House Committee on Ethics has exclusive jurisdiction.⁵⁶

Support services for victims include a legal advisory partnership and trained first responders, with access to shelter and psychosocial support through collaboration with local government units. A dedicated hotline facilitates confidential reporting. Since the launch of these mechanisms, awareness of rights and obligations has increased, and disclosures are on the rise. Since 2020, three cases were reported via the hotline, with two currently under review by the Disciplinary Board.⁵⁷

To actively engage men in activities and programmes addressing violence against women, the HRep launched the Men Opposed to Violence Against Women Everywhere (MOVE-HRep). This is an organization of male employees committed to promoting gender equality and preventing VAWP. Last December 2025, MOVE-HRep conducted a lecture-forum on positive masculinity, fostering conversation on healthy gender norms, respectful relationships, and the crucial role that men play in creating a safer and more inclusive workplace.

55 UN-Women, *Prevention and Response to Sexual Harassment – Successful Training Recipe*, 2025.

56 Op. cit., see footnote 5.

57 Op. cit., see footnote 5.

These efforts align with broader national policies such as the Safe Spaces Act (Republic Act No. 11313),⁵⁸ which expands the definition of sexual harassment to include peer-to-peer harassment in workplaces, educational institutions and public spaces, both offline and online. The Act mandates the creation of internal mechanisms for reporting and responding to harassment, and its implementation is monitored by the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee.⁵⁹

Such initiatives reflect a holistic ecosystem of measures, one that integrates awareness-raising, internal accountability, survivor support and legislative alignment. The Philippines' experience offers valuable lessons for parliaments seeking to embed gender equality and promote inclusive leadership into their operational culture and legislative practice.



Case-informed guidance: Key design questions for parliamentary training programmes

- How can we ensure universal participation and give the training institutional weight? Should participation be mandatory?
- Do we have strong political buy-in from leadership to support and legitimize this initiative?
- Are training modules tailored to the specific responsibilities and realities of different actors (for example, MPs, staff, leadership)?
- Can we include interactive or experiential elements, such as role plays or bystander training, to improve engagement and retention?
- Should refresher courses be scheduled regularly (for example, every three years) to reinforce learning over time?
- How can we integrate this training into onboarding processes for new MPs and staff to ensure continuity and sustainability?
- What measures can we put in place to publicly track participation and promote accountability?
- Who will be responsible for oversight, follow-up and enforcement, and do they have the authority and capacity to ensure compliance?
- How will the training address and shift existing cultural norms and resistance to change within the institution?
- What systems are in place to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the training programme over time?
- Do we have adequate resources, staffing and technical capacity to deliver and sustain the training programme?

58 Government of the Philippines (Philippine Commission on Women), *Republic Act 11313: Safe Spaces Act*, 2018.

59 UN-Women, *PH implementation of UNGA Resolution 73/148 "Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: sexual harassment" covering 01 August 2018 to date*, 2020.

2.5 Advocacy

Advocacy efforts, such as visibility campaigns, public outreach and awareness-raising initiatives, aim to spotlight VAWP, promote effective solutions and mobilize collective action. While many actors engage in advocacy, parliaments are uniquely positioned to champion these efforts, given their central role in shaping and providing a platform for public discourse. By speaking out and actively supporting advocacy initiatives, parliaments signal a strong institutional commitment, both to their members and to the broader public, helping to drive the cultural and societal shifts needed to make political spaces more inclusive, accountable and representative.

Because advocacy and awareness-raising often require fewer resources and less political will than legislative or institutional reform, they can offer accessible entry points, especially in contexts where VAWP remains sensitive or overlooked. These efforts should not be underestimated, however. Advocacy can be a critical first step in bringing the issue to the surface, forming cross-sector coalitions and building momentum for change. In many of the success stories highlighted in this report, early advocacy laid the foundation for more ambitious reforms. Indonesia and Benin offer a compelling example of how parliaments can use advocacy as an initial strategy, working in partnership with national and international actors to begin addressing VAWP.

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Indonesia

Context and opportunity

Despite a mandated 30% gender quota, women hold 129 of 580 seats (22.24%) in the House of Representatives, as of 1 January 2026. Reports have indicated that VAWP remains a significant barrier to women’s full and equal political participation.⁶⁰ In 2022, Indonesia’s Women’s Parliamentary Caucus, with support from UN-Women and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, formally elevated the issue within the parliamentary agenda, marking the first official recognition of VAWP as an institutional concern.⁶¹ Their campaign to end VAWP capitalized on growing national concern around electoral inclusion and the momentum of a global advocacy moment.

16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence

Observed annually from 25 November to 10 December, the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence is a global campaign to end violence against women and girls. Launched in 1991, it provides a strategic platform for parliamentarians to mobilize public awareness, advance legislative priorities and present a united front with stakeholders and collaborators.

Parliamentarians take a stand

As part of the 2022 campaign, the Women’s Parliamentary Caucus convened a high-level event in the national parliament to publicly condemn VAWP. Speaker Puan Maharani and other senior parliamentarians signed a formal declaration committing to eliminating all forms of violence targeting women politicians, marking the first official parliamentary recognition of VAWP in Indonesia. The event featured panel discussions with legislators, civil society leaders and UN-Women representatives. Speaker Maharani called for collective action to “break the culture of silence” and ensure women could engage in politics free from fear and intimidation.

By addressing VAWP in a formal parliamentary setting, the initiative helped break taboos around the issue and positioned parliament as an advocate for reform. It sent a clear signal that VAWP is not just a private matter but a threat to democratic participation and equality. It also provided an opportunity for women MPs to come together across party lines for collective action.

From recognition to reform

Research conducted by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy examining the 2024 elections identified an increase in incidents of VAWP during the electoral period, underscoring the urgency of strengthening preventive and responsive institutional measures within parliament and across the broader political ecosystem.⁶² The prior public recognition of this issue within parliament contributed to sustained institutional awareness and reinforced expectations for continued action.

60 Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), *Violence against Women in Indonesia’s 2024 Elections*, 2025.

61 UN-Women Asia and the Pacific, *Indonesian parliament calls for urgent action to end violence against women in politics*, 2022; and WFD, *Indonesian parliament calls for urgent action to end violence against women in politics*, 2022.

62 Op. cit., see footnote 56.

From this perspective, early advocacy can play a foundational role in strengthening accountability and shaping longer-term responses. The networks and infrastructures established during the 2022 campaign, such as cross-party coalitions, public messaging tools and civil society partnerships continue to provide an important platform for engagement. These parliamentary efforts align with Indonesia’s broader legislative commitment to addressing gender-based violence.

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Ecuador Member of a Polling Station Board MJRV





Benin

Advocacy as a catalyst for institutional reform

In Benin, advocacy has served as a strategic entry point for addressing VAWP. Inspired by the findings of the 2021 IPU-APU (African Parliamentary Union) study on sexism, harassment and violence against women in African parliaments, the National Assembly undertook a series of awareness-raising initiatives during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence in both 2021 and 2022. These efforts were not only symbolic but also instrumental in laying the groundwork for structural change.⁶³

In 2021, MP Baba Moussa delivered a plenary statement summarizing the IPU-APU study's conclusions.⁶⁴ This public acknowledgment of the issue marked a significant moment of institutional recognition. A workshop followed, targeting both parliamentarians and administrative staff. Co-organized with the Institut national de la femme (national women's institute), the session combined data-driven dialogue with visual storytelling, providing illustrations from the study to humanize the statistics and foster empathy.⁶⁵ These activities helped to build internal awareness and encouraged reflection on the lived experiences of women in politics.

In 2022, the Assembly expanded its advocacy to the public sphere. A televised and radio broadcast on Benin's parliamentary channel addressed VAWP directly, complemented by visual messaging through banners and *kakemonos* displayed across parliamentary premises. This multi-platform approach helped normalize conversations around harassment and positioned the Assembly as a proactive institution. The use of cultural mediums and public-facing communication strategies reflected a deliberate effort to shift norms and foster broader societal engagement.

These advocacy efforts were not isolated gestures but part of a sustained campaign that culminated in tangible institutional reforms. In collaboration with the *Institut national de la femme*, the Assembly appointed focal points tasked with raising awareness, listening to victims and managing complaints. A formal complaints mechanism was also established, offering survivors a pathway to redress within the parliamentary institution. These developments illustrate how advocacy, when grounded in credible evidence and timed with global campaigns, can serve as a lever for institutional change.

Benin's experience underscores the importance of framing advocacy around empirical data, engaging both parliamentary leadership and technical institutions, and using creative mediums to foster empathy and awareness. By leveraging the momentum of international studies and aligning with global campaigns, the Assembly was able to initiate change even in the absence of prior formal mechanisms. This case offers a compelling example of how advocacy can bring sensitive issues to the surface, build cross-sectoral coalitions and create the space necessary for change.

⁶³ Op. cit., see footnote 5.

⁶⁴ IPU News in brief, *African parliaments talk openly about sexism*, 2022.

⁶⁵ Op. cit., see footnote 5.



Case-based reflections: Rooting advocacy in local contexts

Case-based reflections show advocacy is vital in all contexts but especially crucial where backlash against gender equality, or political leadership changes, limit formal reform opportunities. In these environments, advocacy often remains one of the few viable strategies for women’s coalitions, civil society and practitioners seeking change. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach, especially when it comes to designing effective awareness campaigns in sensitive settings, this section offers reflections and guiding questions to help tailor advocacy to local political and institutional realities.

Clarify the purpose of advocacy

Begin by defining what the campaign aims to do. Is it to:

- Make visible a neglected issue?
- Keep gender equality on the agenda amid political turmoil?
- Mobilize cross-party support?
- Persuade sceptics or shift narratives?
- Communicate parliamentary values publicly?
- Increase awareness of VAWP?
- Encourage women’s political participation?
- Generate public pressure for institutional change?

Purpose shapes tactics. For example, in parliaments with a strong presence of women MPs, internal advocacy can leverage strength in numbers to reduce backlash and push for change from within. Where women’s representation is limited, perhaps due to the threat or reality of violence, external campaigns and civil society partnerships may be more effective in raising awareness, proposing solutions and encouraging more women to run for office.

Adapt messaging for broader appeal

VAWP stems from gender inequality but can be framed to connect with wider concerns. This is particularly helpful when gender equality is politicized or contested. Effective approaches include:

- framing the issue as equality for all, not only gender equality;
- linking women’s issues to broader challenges like poverty or public well-being; and
- highlighting how violence and harassment hinder representatives from fulfilling their duties, affecting democratic governance.

Such framing can engage political allies across divides and shift the narrative from a “women’s issue” to a matter of governance and democracy.

Manage risks and seize opportunities

Change is slow and may provoke resistance or backlash, particularly in polarized or male-dominated settings. Strategies to counteract this include:

- starting with informal, behind-the-scenes coalition building to gauge support; and
- using credible evidence, surveys, testimonies and reports to depoliticize the agenda and build a shared basis for action.

Stay alert to windows of opportunity, such as leadership changes, elections, scandals or media attention, which can generate public pressure, shift political incentives or create space for previously sidelined issues to gain traction, especially when the groundwork has already been laid.

Build partnerships to sustain advocacy

Successful advocacy hinges on collaboration with civil society organizations, private sector actors, trade unions and others to:

- deliver coherent, complementary messaging that reinforces the issue's importance and keeps it visible;
- mobilize resources and expertise across sectors to strengthen reach and impact;
- ensure advocacy continues at the local, decentralized level when shifts in political leadership limit national or high-profile actors' ability to sustain efforts; and
- ground advocacy in local realities by partnering with grassroots organizations, especially where gender equality is viewed as externally imposed.

Even when formal reforms stall or political will wanes, these partnership-driven cultural shifts and growing awareness endure, underscoring the indispensable role of advocacy, even when progress seems slow or uncertain.

2.6 Measures against technology-facilitated gender-based violence

Although many public figures experience online abuse, the violence directed at women MPs follows distinctly gendered patterns. It often includes misogynistic slurs, sexualized disinformation, threats against family members, the non-consensual sharing of intimate or fabricated images, and coordinated campaigns aimed at undermining legitimacy and deterring participation. This technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) operates at the intersection of political contestation, gender inequality and digital platform dynamics. It both reflects broader societal misogyny and exploits the specific visibility, authority and scrutiny attached to parliamentary office.

One factor that has intensified these risks is the changing visibility of parliamentary work. As legislatures have embraced livestreaming, social media engagement and real-time communication to strengthen openness, the digital environments in which this transparency unfolds are shaped by algorithms that amplify provocation, simplify narratives and reward polarization. Parliamentary moments – clips from plenary, committee exchanges or media appearances – can be reframed, decontextualized and rapidly circulated in ways that trigger large-scale, gendered pile-ons. Importantly, the harm does not arise from transparency itself, but from how parliamentary visibility now interacts with platform incentives, political hostility and gendered norms. Experts interviewed have noted that visibility tends to spike during parliamentary sessions, anonymity is no longer the dominant driver of threats (many are now made publicly) and growing political polarization has intensified aggressive commentary. Women MPs are therefore exposed to backlash originating from parliamentary speech or conduct even where no misconduct, incitement or intent exists within parliament.

At the same time, most TFGBV against women MPs unfolds within a wider online ecosystem that current legal and institutional frameworks struggle to address. Much of the abuse is generated by anonymous accounts, loosely coordinated

networks or automated systems employed to operate across multiple jurisdictions, which significantly complicates attribution and enforcement. Many forms of harmful content – sexualized commentary, misogynistic speech, coordinated harassment or disinformation – fall below criminal thresholds in national law in many countries. Even when offences exist, identifying perpetrators or securing cross-border evidence is often difficult. In some contexts, reporting may also be limited due to political sensitivities or concerns about retaliation. As a result, women MPs regularly face severe intimidation or reputational harm without the possibility of criminal recourse.

Parliamentary frameworks face their own structural limits. Codes of conduct generally regulate behaviour within the institution and between members or staff; they rarely extend to anonymous actors or networked online harms triggered by parliamentary visibility. Moreover, in many systems parliaments are not legally the “employer” of MPs and therefore lack formal occupational-safety responsibilities, even though MPs face threats precisely because of their public role. This creates a paradox: MPs encounter risks linked to parliamentary visibility, yet fall outside many of the institutional protections that apply to parliamentary staff. Variations in MPs’ own awareness of security risks further underscore the need for structured induction and ongoing awareness-raising. These institutional parameters mean that substantial categories of online abuse fall outside parliamentary jurisdiction, leaving protection gaps even when the abuse is clearly linked to parliamentary activity.

These dynamics underscore a central finding of this study: TFGBV against women MPs exposes structural gaps that neither criminal law nor traditional parliamentary rules were designed to fill. The forms of abuse most women MPs face fall into grey zones – harmful enough to distort democratic participation, yet frequently outside criminal thresholds and beyond the remit of internal codes of conduct. This gap is not a marginal issue: it affects democratic functioning by shaping who speaks, who

participates and who remains in public life. This is precisely why institutional responses have begun to emerge across different parts of the parliamentary ecosystem, not as replacements for legal reform but as mechanisms that make protections real in practice.

Across jurisdictions, parliaments are experimenting with new institutional arrangements that compensate for these gaps – by embedding digital harassment into legal, security and protection systems, creating or empowering specialized regulators with authority over online harms, or building data tools that help distinguish harmful abuse from legitimate political contestation. These responses vary in scope and maturity, but together they

illustrate the types of institutional architecture required to bridge the protection gaps faced by women in political life.

The case studies that follow – drawn from Mexico, Australia, Switzerland and Uruguay – highlight distinct but complementary approaches: legal reform; integrating online threats into personal protection systems; creating independent regulatory bodies with enforcement powers; and building evidence systems that enable proportionate, informed action. Individually, these models address particular gaps; collectively, they show how parliamentary institutions can operationalize protections in contexts where the legal toolkit alone is insufficient.



Mexico

Legislative innovation – the Ley Olimpia model

Mexico’s reforms on political gender-based violence and digital violence stand out for the way they combine grassroots advocacy, parliamentary leadership and legal innovation. In 2020, parliament amended both electoral and gender-equality legislation to recognize violence against women in politics as a distinct legal category, explicitly linking gender-based abuse to restrictions on democratic participation. In the same year, the federal *Ley Olimpia* (Olimpia Law) criminalized digital and image-based abuse, establishing one of the most comprehensive frameworks globally for technology-facilitated violence. These reforms emerged from close collaboration between feminist digital-rights activists – most prominently Olimpia Coral Melo – and parliamentary champions who worked to transform a citizen-led proposal into nationwide legal change.

About the law

The 2020 political gender-based violence reforms created definitions, sanctions and procedures for acts intended to obstruct women’s political rights. Electoral authorities were mandated to investigate and sanction political gender-based violence, anchoring prevention and accountability within democratic institutions. By naming digital violence in law, Mexico reframed online abuse as a rights violation and a barrier to public participation, rather than a private dispute. In parallel, the *Ley Olimpia* modified federal and state criminal laws to deal with the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images and deepfakes, doxing, digital harassment and threats, and the full chain of dissemination, not just the original perpetrators.

Implementation and practice

Following the federal reform, public institutions rapidly expanded their activity. National reviews show that 75% of institutional actions addressing digital sexual violence occurred after 2020, reflecting the reform’s catalytic effect. Women’s institutes and human rights bodies led awareness-raising campaigns, training and development of protocols, while prosecutors’ offices began establishing specialized units.

Public awareness-raising efforts, such as the *Violentómetro Digital* and state-level guides, have made the law visible and helped shift social norms around reporting and accountability. While national implementation of the *Ley Olimpia* has progressed unevenly across institutions, the Senate represents a compelling example, having consolidated fragmented internal mechanisms into a coherent, survivor-centred system with clearer responsibilities, stronger monitoring and regular oversight (see the Mexico case study under “Self-regulation practices”).

Technology-facilitated violence and democratic participation

A central contribution of Mexico’s model is the way it bridges digital rights and democratic rights. The reforms recognize that online misogyny, sexualized disinformation and targeted harassment are not only personal harms, but tools used to discourage women’s participation, silence their voices, or undermine their legitimacy as public actors.

Studies show that the overwhelming majority of victims of digital sexual violence in Mexico are women, and that online abuse has tangible effects on political engagement, self-censorship and retention of women candidates. Low levels of reporting, driven by distrust of institutions and fear of re-victimization, continue to limit enforcement. Yet the legal framework itself has reshaped public debate, shifting responsibility away from victims and normalizing the expectation of institutional response.

Mexico's experience highlights lessons for parliaments

Mexico offers a model for addressing TFGBV that is simultaneously **legal, institutional** and **cultural**. Embedding TFGBV across criminal, electoral and gender-equality frameworks reframes it as a systemic threat to democratic participation, not just an individual or online safety issue.

- **Legal reform and cultural change were mutually reinforcing.** The visibility of the Ley Olimpia, coupled with national awareness-raising campaigns, helped shift public norms, improve reporting and reposition shame and accountability towards perpetrators.
- **Partnerships with civil society enhanced legitimacy and impact.** Parliament acted as a platform for feminist digital-rights advocacy, demonstrating how integration can translate citizen-driven initiatives into structural reform.
- **Implementation remained uneven across institutions.** While the legal architecture is comprehensive, enforcement capacity varies widely at state and federal levels. There is a need for coordinated institutional strengthening, including clearer procedures, specialized capacity development and better mechanisms.



Australia

Australia's eSafety Commissioner: A parliament-enabled regulator supporting women in politics and public life

Australia offers an example of how a legislature can create and strengthen an online safety regulatory body to address digital harms that sit beyond the reach of criminal law or internal parliamentary processes. The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) is the Australian Government's independent online safety regulator and educator. eSafety was established as the world's first state-led regulatory body for online safety under the Enhancing Online Safety for Children Act 2015. Following this, the Online Safety Act 2021 was passed and expanded eSafety's regulatory powers significantly. The new legislation broadened the scope of eSafety's reporting schemes, shifting the initial focus from protecting children to enabling all Australians to report online harms.

The expansion of eSafety's mandate took place amid increased public calls for government to act to end all forms of violence against women and girls and the implementation of the first National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2010–2022. The Online Safety Act emerged in this context, reflecting parliament's recognition that existing laws and platform self-regulation were inadequate for addressing online harms that disproportionately impact women, including image-based abuse and adult cyber abuse.

Mandate and powers of the eSafety Commissioner

eSafety is mandated under the Online Safety Act 2021 to help safeguard Australians at risk of online harms and to promote safer, more positive online experiences. eSafety uses a broad suite of regulatory powers to prevent and remediate online harm, hold online service providers accountable, and drive systemic safety improvements across digital platforms.

These powers include administering complaints and reporting schemes that address child cyberbullying, adult cyber abuse, image-based abuse and illegal and restricted online content. This includes the authority to require online service providers to remove material that meets statutory harm thresholds.

The Online Safety Act 2021 also introduced the Basic Online Safety Expectations (BOSE), which outline the Australian Government's expectations that online service providers will take reasonable steps to keep Australians safe. Under the Act, eSafety can require online service providers to report on how they are meeting any or all of the BOSE. The requirements are designed to improve providers' safety standards and improve transparency and accountability.

Additionally, the Act grants eSafety legislative powers to register and enforce online safety codes and standards relating to unlawful and age-restricted material online.

eSafety also has compliance and enforcement powers, including information-gathering powers and being able to issue service provider notifications, formal warnings, infringement notices and civil penalty orders.

eSafety's authority is accompanied by regular scrutiny: it reports annually through the Minister for Communications to Parliament, appears at Senate Estimates, and contributes evidence to parliamentary inquiries on issues including social media, online harms, and family, domestic and sexual violence. These oversight practices ensure community trust and continuity between parliamentary debate, committee findings and regulatory implementation.

Prevention and capacity-building

Alongside its enforcement role, eSafety has developed a substantial prevention and capacity-building function. To support women who are politicians, candidates or in public life, eSafety delivers the Social Media Self-Defence Training domestically. The training is a short, customized programme designed to help people who use social media as part of their professional or public-facing roles to build the skills to stay safe online. It supports those at higher risk of online abuse by giving them an evidence-based understanding of common online abuse, its personal and professional impacts, and the practical steps they can take to reduce risk. This training has been adapted for international contexts.

Additionally, eSafety has developed resources to support workplaces to address TFGBV, including working with SafeWork Australia to develop workplace guidance. These resources complement the new “positive duty” under the Sex Discrimination Act, which requires all employers – including parliamentary workplaces – to take proactive measures to prevent sexual harassment.

eSafety also administers the Australian Government’s Preventing Tech-based Abuse of Women Grants Programme. This programme funds non-governmental organizations to deliver projects that prevent TFGBV.

eSafety further provides a range of tools, resources and training for frontline workers supporting victims of TFGBV in the context of family, domestic and sexual violence. This includes providing a free self-paced online learning course and live webinars. eSafety’s Tech-facilitated Abuse (TFA) Support Service provides a website enquiry form, a dedicated phone line, and a web-based information hub to provide additional guidance and advice to frontline workers where a client might be more vulnerable to digital tracking, harassment and surveillance.

Multi-actor cooperation and the national ecosystem

eSafety operates within a broader ecosystem shaped by the National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, coordinated regulatory efforts such as the Digital Platforms Regulators Forum, and civil society organizations that work to support women’s political participation and strengthen digital safety practices.

eSafety also works with international regulators, civil society, non-governmental organizations and academic institutions through the Global Online Regulators Network, which was established to develop regulatory coherence across jurisdictions and promote compliance with rights-respecting online safety regulation.

Reflection

The eSafety example illustrates how a parliament can strengthen the national online-safety system by legislating for and empowering an independent regulatory body that delivers the practical tools, training and prevention programmes supporting women in public life. Taken together, these elements illustrate a model in which parliament-enabled regulation complements criminal law and internal parliamentary processes, offering both systemic and practical tools for mitigating technology-facilitated gender-based violence against MPs and parliamentary staff.



Switzerland

Switzerland's Federal Parliament: Institutional security architecture for addressing threats and harassment

Background

Switzerland has formalized a professional protection system for members of the Federal Assembly that treats online threats and harassment as occupational risks to be assessed and managed, not merely as reputational disputes. A 2025 federal brief, based on a University of Zurich study, reported that almost all MPs had faced hostility, ranging from insults, to hate speech, threats, or even physical aggression, prompting the Federal Office of Police (fedpol) to bolster information, advisory and awareness measures for MPs.⁶⁶

Legal and institutional foundation

In Switzerland, MPs are not employed by parliament; their mandate derives directly from the electorate. As a result, parliamentary services do not have the legal role of an “employer” in relation to MPs, even though many of the risks they face, especially online threats linked to their political activity, arise from their public function. This means that protection and support must be organized through institutional cooperation rather than employer-based mechanisms, with parliamentary services providing advice and coordination, while fedpol retains formal responsibility for personal protection.

Switzerland's model is characterized by a clear division of roles, structured pathways and early reporting rather than ad hoc or political handling of individual cases. This structure ensures consistent treatment of cases and provides MPs, especially women MPs who report most incidents, with a reliable mechanism for seeking help:

- **Security Delegate within parliamentary services.** The Federal Assembly's internal ordinance provides for a *délégué à la sécurité/beauftragter für sicherheit* (security officer) who serves as a neutral, technical point of contact in the parliamentary administration. The ordinance specifies the Delegate's role, including targeted data checks and the interface with parliamentary governing bodies; evidence of an institutionalized, non-partisan security function.⁶⁷
- **Police coordination and protective measures.** Fedpol holds the federal mandate for the personal protection of federal authorities and other internationally protected persons, and it partners with parliamentary services on threat assessment and responses.⁶⁸
- **Reporting channel for MPs.** Since autumn 2022, MPs can file threat reports via a fedpol smartphone application that transmits incidents rapidly and directly to fedpol.⁶⁹

66 Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, (press release) “*Les actes d’hostilité contre les parlementaires sont quotidiens en Suisse*”, 2025.

67 Fedlex, Swiss Government, 171.115 Ordonnance de l’Assemblée fédérale portant application de la loi sur le Parlement et relative à l’administration du Parlement of 2023.

68 Swiss Confederation, Federal Office of Police (fedpol).

69 Swiss Federal Justice and Police Department, *fedpol24*, n.d.

→ **Address and exposure risk.** Public debate and legislative work have increasingly focused on limiting the exposure of politicians' private addresses. Media coverage in 2025 highlighted mixed practice and risks in publishing personal addresses, while federal proposals in 2025 moved to modernize national address handling and reduce unnecessary disclosure.⁷⁰

Institutional design, practice and emerging lessons

Switzerland's Federal Parliament manages threats through an integrated architecture that combines neutral in-house expertise with formal cooperation between parliamentary services and the Federal Office of Police (fedpol). Cases typically begin with first-level analysis by the Security Delegate, who conducts a preliminary risk appraisal and issues recommendations. Where necessary, incidents escalate to fedpol for investigation and protective measures, embedding threat management within a predictable workflow rather than relying on ad hoc political responses.

The system's effectiveness rests on a clear division of roles and rapid communication channels. A direct, MP-specific reporting application allows parliamentarians to transmit threats to fedpol securely, complementing traditional reporting methods and standardizing evidence capture. This "report early, report often" logic enables faster assessment of patterns such as coordinated online abuse.

By situating online harassment, including cyber harassment and sextortion, within the remit of security, Switzerland recognizes such conduct as a workplace risk requiring the same procedural seriousness as physical threats. This aligns with the 2025 federal initiative to expand advice and awareness measures to MPs facing hostility.

Attention to privacy and exposure risks has further strengthened the system. Legislative debate and administrative reform around the publication of personal addresses, together with fedpol's work on centralizing address queries, have reduced the likelihood of doxing and other forms of targeted intrusion. These measures demonstrate how legal and architectural adjustments can mitigate threats upstream, not merely through reactive policing.

Finally, evidence-informed adaptation remains a defining feature. Research documenting hostility against MPs has fed back into policy updates, legitimizing investment in security functions and ensuring that institutional arrangements evolve with the changing nature of threats.

Limits and gaps

Swiss experience indicates perpetrators are rarely identified, which constrains purely reactive enforcement and underscores the value of prevention, rapid reporting and deterrence. In addition, while specialist support is sourced in areas like sexual or cyber harassment, take-up can remain modest, suggesting residual stigma or a preference for police-centred channels.

Reflection

Switzerland's model demonstrates how a parliament, despite constitutional limits on its ability to protect MPs, can nonetheless build **institutional readiness** for both physical and digital threats. The combination of a neutral in-house security function, predictable coordination with fedpol, rapid reporting tools and iterative adjustments informed by research creates a layered system that supports MPs facing increasing hostility.

⁷⁰ RTS, "Le dilemme de rendre publique ou non son adresse en tant que parlementaire", 2025.



Uruguay

Data-driven monitoring

Women's political participation in Uruguay remains limited. A significant barrier is TFGBV, online harassment targeting women politicians and public figures that causes psychological harm, reduces their visibility, and sometimes forces withdrawal from public life. This abuse undermines democratic participation and governance, especially as digital platforms become central to political engagement.

The initiative

The UNDP partnered with the British Embassy and Uruguay's *Instituto nacional de las mujeres* (national women's institute) to develop a real-time monitoring system for TFGBV.⁷¹ This initiative aims to systematically document and analyse TFGBV against women leaders in Uruguay, moving beyond anecdotal evidence to generate data that can inform public policy, enhance survivor support and hold perpetrators accountable. Strong commitments from both parliament and the UNDP country office to gender equality and digital innovation have created an enabling environment to pilot innovative, technology-driven responses.⁷²

An AI-powered tool was trained to detect and categorize abusive content on X (formerly Twitter) targeting women leaders across politics, media, culture and activism. The system analyses tweets hourly, classifying them to support evidence-based interventions and policy responses.

The AI tool identifies seven key categories of abuse:

- **Ability underestimation:** Comments questioning competence or leadership capacity.
- **Body and/or sexuality-based comments:** Objectification or sexualization related to appearance.
- **Ideological affiliation:** Attacks on political beliefs or activist roles.
- **Identity-based attacks:** Insults linked to gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, age or social class.
- **Sexual and physical threats:** Explicit or implicit threats of violence.
- **Disavowal of speech:** Attempts to silence or delegitimize women's voices.
- **Accusations of delinquency or abuse of power:** Allegations of corruption or misconduct.

⁷¹ UNDP, *Monitor on Digital Violence against Women in Uruguay*, 2023.

⁷² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Commend Uruguay's Commitment to Implementing the Convention, Ask about Women's Access to Justice and Gender Parity in Politics*, 2023.

Findings and outcomes

From March 2022 to March 2023, the system monitored tweets mentioning 180 high-profile women, including 41 politicians. For example, in February–March 2023, 11.3% of tweets about women politicians and 15% about women leaders contained violent language. These findings illustrate the scale and types of abuse faced across different roles.

In addition to collecting data, the project convened affected women in confidential spaces to discuss the findings and share experiences. This fostered solidarity, reduced feelings of isolation and empowered collective action. The initiative brought together women parliamentarians and civil society actors in a series of multi-stakeholder exchanges aimed at exploring evidence-informed policy proposals and legislative responses to technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Issue embedding and alignment

The UNDP in Uruguay has demonstrated strong capacity to leverage digitalization as a cross-cutting tool for advancing governance and inclusion. Crucially, the TFGBV monitoring initiative was not implemented as an isolated project but thoughtfully embedded within broader national agendas on digital innovation and gender equality. This approach enhances the sustainability and impact of interventions by aligning efforts across sectors and policy areas.



eMonitor+: Using AI to understand and address technology-facilitated gender-based violence

The UNDP's eMonitor+ platform combines AI-driven monitoring with human analysis to detect harmful online content such as hate speech, disinformation and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). It has been deployed with electoral management bodies, media regulators and civil society partners in more than 25 countries, including Lebanon, Libya, Peru and Tunisia.

eMonitor+ illustrates how institutions could strengthen their ability to address TFGBV against their members. TFGBV is a relatively new and rapidly evolving phenomenon that remains understudied and often poorly understood. To date, most evidence collection in this area has relied on surveys, which are valuable but cannot capture the full scale, nature or dynamics of online abuse. Without robust data, responses risk being imprecise or disproportionate. In parliamentary contexts this is especially sensitive, with interventions often raising concerns around freedom of expression, the adversarial character of democratic debate and the scope of parliamentary privilege. By generating real-time, evidence-based insights, eMonitor+ can help distinguish harmful abuse from legitimate contestation, enabling proportionate strategies that both protect women MPs and safeguard open democratic culture.

2.7 Support services

In recent years, parliaments have increasingly recognized the importance of providing robust support services for survivors of sexual harassment. These services can take many forms, including legal aid (during election campaigns or in response to harassment cases), medical care and counselling. While they carry some financial cost, support services are often less politically sensitive than broader reforms, making them more feasible in contexts where there is limited support for legislative change.

Crucially, support services also lower the psychological and bureaucratic barriers survivors face. Accessing care or counselling is often far less daunting than formally reporting a perpetrator, especially in environments where sexual harassment remains stigmatized or rarely acknowledged. In fact, this focus on reducing access barriers was a key reason France implemented the support model highlighted below.

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Representatives of National Human Rights Institutions
at the 12th International Conference.





France

In France, parliamentary responses to harassment have evolved under sustained public scrutiny and periodic high-profile cases.⁷³ Within the Senate, questions of how allegations are handled, by whom, and with what degree of transparency have been contested in public debate, underscoring the importance of credible procedures, clear institutional roles and survivor-safe pathways.

The Senate's current framework builds on the establishment in 2009 of the Parliamentary Ethics Committee (*Comité de déontologie parlementaire*),⁷⁴ composed exclusively of senators, and positioned within the institution's broader ethics architecture. The model is best understood as a sequenced pathway that separates support, assessment or investigation, and decision-making. Initial entry points rely on external professional services, which provide a first-line channel for harassment situations, particularly where staff are involved, allowing complainants to seek assistance outside internal hierarchies. These services are open to both staff and senators and may offer mediation where appropriate, while also enabling escalation where necessary. Subject to the presumed survivor's consent, the reception and support unit may then draft a formal complaint report in cases of suspected harassment.

Where the alleged perpetrator is a senator, this report is sent directly to the Parliamentary Ethics Committee. Where the alleged perpetrator is a parliamentary assistant or trainee, the report is sent to the employing senator and to the Association for the Management of Senators' Assistants (AGAS).

Once the Parliamentary Ethics Committee has examined a case and formulated its position, responsibility for decision and enforcement ultimately rests with the Bureau which, consistent with Senate rules and practice, translates findings into disciplinary consequences under the Senate's internal regime. The Bureau hears the parties concerned and determines appropriate measures, which may include disciplinary sanctions or human resources action. Bureau decisions are made public; staff identities are protected, while the names of senators subject to sanctions are disclosed.

In serious cases, the President of the Senate may refer matters to the Prosecutor General, consistent with the President's external judicial referral role.

This design strengthens institutional credibility and procedural clarity. Routing sensitive cases through external providers for support and, where relevant, investigatory work was introduced in part to enhance legitimacy for staff and reduce perceived conflicts of interest within a political institution. The model clearly separates listening and support functions, ethics review and Bureau-level enforcement, thereby avoiding situations in which the same actor is expected to counsel, investigate and sanction. By explicitly linking harassment to a breach of dignity under the Senate's Rules of Procedure and to defined disciplinary sanctions, the system reduces ambiguity about whether misconduct constitutes an institutional violation requiring formal response.

The framework also recognizes the procedural complexity of digitally mediated harassment. Institutional services, including technical support, may assist in documenting and preserving evidence prior to referral to prosecutorial authorities, thereby standardizing reporting practices and clarifying escalation routes while maintaining the separation between internal ethics review and criminal enforcement.

73 EUROACTIV.fr, "[Sexism in politics: French MP called 'fish lady' and 'crazy' during debate](#)", 2021.

74 French Senate, [Le Comité de déontologie parlementaire du Sénat](#).

Over time, the Senate has emphasized professionalization and visibility as conditions for effectiveness. Reliance on external experts was intended to strengthen trust, particularly among staff. Induction briefings, training and internal communication have been used to increase awareness of available pathways, reflecting recognition that formal mechanisms only function if they are known and perceived as credible.



Case-based reflections: Key considerations for designing support services

- **Trauma-informed approach:** Support services should be designed with sensitivity to the emotional and psychological impact of harassment. This includes ensuring confidentiality, avoiding re-traumatization and offering survivor-led choices in how to proceed.
- **Accessibility:** Always making support available and open to all parliamentary staff helps reduce barriers and promotes inclusivity. Offering several ways to access help (online, phone, in-person) can better meet diverse needs and preferences.
- **Clear response protocols:** Having well-defined timelines and procedures for assistance encourages trust and accountability, helping survivors feel assured that their concerns will be managed promptly and with care.
- **Coordinated expertise:** Involving legal, psychological and disciplinary professionals working together can provide more comprehensive support and reduce the burden on survivors.
- **Neutral, flexible provision:** Collaborating with external providers or civil society organizations may help minimize internal conflicts and offer more adaptable, impartial services. Survivors may be more willing to engage with services that are clearly separate from internal power structures.
- **Feedback and adaptation mechanisms:** Regular evaluation and feedback loops (for example, annual reports, user surveys) can help identify gaps and improve service delivery. This also signals institutional commitment and accountability.
- **Visibility and awareness:** Promoting the existence and purpose of support services through campaigns, onboarding materials and internal communications ensures that all staff are aware of their rights and options.

2.8 Protection

Protection efforts aim to reduce and prevent the many forms of violence that parliamentarians face, including physical threats and digital abuse such as online harassment, intimidation and targeted attacks. These measures are especially critical for women MPs, who often face sustained, gendered abuse that can extend to their families. Without adequate protection, many

are forced to reduce or abandon their political engagement altogether, making safety not only a matter of individual well-being but a condition for democratic inclusion. While protection measures are often less politically contentious than other reforms, they require dedicated funding and strong coordination with security services and law enforcement to be effective.



United Kingdom

Context: Escalating threats and gendered violence against women in politics

Over the past decade, the United Kingdom has seen a rise in abuse, intimidation and threats towards elected officials, particularly online.⁷⁵ This includes physical attacks and sustained digital abuse, including TFGBV, with female MPs and those from minority backgrounds disproportionately targeted, according to police data.⁷⁶ The scale of these threats has led several MPs to step down from parliament in recent years, highlighting how VAWP undermines core democratic principles such as inclusivity and representation.⁷⁷ The 2016 murder of Labour MP Jo Cox brought national attention to the acute risks politicians face and the urgent need for stronger protective measures.⁷⁸

Institutional response

Prior to 2016, MPs seeking enhanced security were required to undergo a police risk assessment and obtain written estimates before any measures could be implemented. Following the heightened security concerns that year, the UK Parliament swiftly introduced a series of coordinated reforms to improve MPs' safety, recognizing that protection must be proactive and institutionalized rather than ad hoc. Physical security measures were standardized and automatically made available to all MPs.⁷⁹ This approach ensured a baseline level of protection, lowered barriers to access and normalized safety as an integral part of parliamentary life. The scale of these changes is reflected in the dramatic rise in security-related spending: the assistance budget in 2023 was more than 80 times higher than in 2011.

To address continuing threats, the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team, a unit within the Metropolitan Police's Diplomatic Protection Command, was established on the parliamentary estate to investigate threats and coordinate protective responses. In 2018, police reported that more than half of all cases involved female politicians, despite women making up only about one third of MPs.

Digital safety protection and guidance

Digital abuse remains a pervasive and persistent threat. Diane Abbott, the first Black woman elected to parliament, has spoken publicly about the scale of online harassment she faces. Her office devotes considerable time each day to deleting harmful content, blocking abusive accounts and reporting violations to social media platforms, efforts that are essential to maintaining a safer online environment and enabling her to continue her work.⁸⁰

75 Neil Matthews and Sean Haughhey, "The security of politicians: towards a research agenda", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 78/2 (2025), 227–256.

76 UK Institute for Government, *MPs' security*, 2025.

77 UK Institute for Government, *MPs who stood down at the 2024 general election*, 2024.

78 UK Parliament (House of Commons Library), *The legacy of Jo Cox*, 2021; and The Guardian, "Police contact MPs to advise on security after Jo Cox killing: National Police Chiefs' Council says forces are helping MPs to review their personal safety, including at constituency surgeries", 2016.

79 *BBC News*, "MPs to be offered extra security after Jo Cox's death", 2016.

80 UK Government Committee on Standards in Public Life, *Intimidation in Public Life A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life*, 2017.

To assist MPs facing similar challenges, the UK Parliament has produced guidance such as *A Guide to Managing Online & Offline Abuse*,⁸¹ offering practical steps on privacy, content moderation and resilience. While such guidance is critical, especially in contexts where parliaments lack the capacity to institutionalize more robust protections, it is also important to recognize the personal and political costs women MPs bear. The time and energy required to manage digital abuse and security concerns can deter political participation and limit representation.

Given this, parliament established the Social Media Monitoring Service, delivered through the Security Information and Risk Analysis Service.⁸² The service scans Members' public social media accounts for abusive or threatening content, flags harmful material and, where appropriate, refers potential offences to the police.



Insights from case studies: Practical safety measures for women in parliament

Few things are as tragic for the individuals involved – or as damaging to women's political participation – as when women MPs face stalking, harassment or physical violence. The fear alone can prevent elected women from performing their duties or push them to leave politics altogether.

While not all parliaments have the resources of the United Kingdom, physical security is foundational and often enjoys broad political and institutional support. There are strategies available that do not require extensive funding but can still make a significant difference in enabling women to do their jobs safely, as highlighted in examples collected by the IPU.

Practical, politically sustainable safety measures

→ **Conduct regular risk assessments**

Proactively evaluate the specific threats faced by women MPs, both physical and technology facilitated. These assessments should be updated regularly and include input from MPs themselves to reflect evolving risks and responsibilities.

→ **Monitor for online threats**

Assign trained staff to monitor, flag and report threatening or harassing content directed at MPs online. This early detection can help mitigate risk and facilitate coordination with law enforcement when necessary.

→ **Control access to events and workspaces**

Ensure that both physical and digital environments where women MPs work, meet or speak are secure. For offices and in-person events, monitor entrances and exits, maintain visitor logs and ensure trained personnel are on hand. For virtual sessions, use secure platforms with authentication features such as waiting rooms, passwords or registration to prevent unauthorized access.

81 Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), UK Parliament, *CPA UK's Women Parliamentarians Roadshow: A Guide to Addressing Online Abuse*, 2021; and CPA, UK Parliament, *A Guide to Managing Online & Offline Abuse*, 2022.

82 CPA Scottish Parliament, *Report of the 9th British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Conference*, Gibraltar, 2022.

→ **Use buddy systems and safe transport options**

Encourage women MPs to travel in pairs or groups, especially at night or in higher-risk environments. In India, for example, the *Rajya Sabha* secretariat has developed a mobile app that allows staff working late to request a vehicle and be driven home.⁸³

→ **Provide panic alert tools**

Make available discreet panic buttons, mobile applications or wearable devices that MPs can use to immediately contact parliamentary or external security services. In New Zealand, MPs have access to Safe Hub, an app that allows them to request emergency assistance from parliamentary security.⁸⁴

→ **Strengthen coordination with police and security services**

Establish clear procedures for collaborating with police and internal security units, including support for filing police reports and following up on threats. Ensure that all security personnel are trained to respond in a gender-sensitive manner.

Workplace culture change: White Ribbon accreditation initiative

Parallel to investments in physical and digital protection, efforts are under way to strengthen the workplace culture that shapes safety in parliament. A growing cross-party coalition of MPs is campaigning for the UK Parliament to become the world's first legislature to secure White Ribbon accreditation – a formal commitment to prevent violence against women by transforming workplace culture and promoting active allyship among men.

White Ribbon accreditation requires a multi-year action plan that includes:

- training and awareness programmes for MPs and staff;
- strengthened reporting mechanisms for harassment;
- proactive prevention measures; and
- visible leadership commitment from parliamentary authorities.

The campaign reflects the recognition that parliamentary safety is not only a matter of security infrastructure but also of cultural norms: power hierarchies, informal practices, alcohol-linked environments, and the absence of standardized human resources processes have historically made many women feel unsafe on the parliamentary estate. It builds on earlier initiatives, including the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme and the findings of numerous reviews – summarized in the Fawcett Society's 2023 audit – which collectively highlighted continuing gaps in culture, accountability and follow-through.

83 Op. cit., see footnote 5.

84 Op. cit., see footnote 5.

2.9 Support groups

Support groups are essential for survivors of gender-based violence and for women parliamentarians more broadly, offering safe spaces to share experiences, voice concerns and find peer support. These groups may form informally among MPs or complement formal institutional mechanisms, particularly in contexts where official channels are limited, inaccessible or lack trust. Women's caucuses, one of the most common forms of structured support, can play a significant role in fostering cross-party connection and solidarity. While they are sometimes positioned as tools for advancing policy, they lack the formal powers, mandates or resources of parliamentary committees. Their value, therefore, lies less in legislative influence than in the informal space they offer for peer support, confidence-building and coordination. There are notable exceptions, such as Sierra Leone's caucus highlighted below, but these remain the exception rather than the rule.

Still, when approached primarily as spaces for mutual support rather than policymaking, women's caucuses can serve an important function, particularly if their structural limitations are recognized and addressed. One key challenge is high member turnover, which often leads to a loss of institutional knowledge and requires rebuilding relationships after each election cycle. This can be especially difficult in highly partisan environments, where cross-party collaboration is fragile. To be effective, caucuses benefit from sustained institutional and political backing, including visible support from male allies. Moreover, in parliaments where women remain significantly underrepresented, or where national sensitivities constrain open dialogue, cross-national and regional networks can also play a critical role.



Sierra Leone

From peer support to political reform

Gender-based violence and political exclusion remain entrenched barriers in Sierra Leone's political landscape. Once elected, women MPs often face heightened scrutiny and entrenched patriarchal resistance.⁸⁵ Although parliament has adopted internal policies, such as a gender strategy and complaints committee, these mechanisms are rarely trusted or effectively enforced. In this context, the Sierra Leone Parliamentary Women's Caucus has emerged as a trusted and effective entry point for addressing VAWP.

Building Trust and capacity

The caucus provides a cross-party platform where women parliamentarians can safely reflect on and take concrete steps to mitigate and address the gendered violence they experience. This is a critical first step: recognizing such incidents not as isolated, personal events but as part of a broader systemic pattern rooted in shared societal perceptions of women's leadership that often serve to undermine women's political participation. By creating space for these conversations, the caucus ensures that both its members and supporting practitioners understand the political and cultural forces at play, allowing context to inform all programming. Through retreats and workshops, often supported by partners such as UN-Women, the UNDP and the IPU, members build core skills in public speaking, negotiation and coalition building. These gatherings also foster solidarity and help develop shared strategies to guide the caucus's internal operations and external engagement.

Institutional backing

While many women's caucuses operate at the margins of parliamentary life, the Sierra Leone Parliamentary Women's Caucus stands out for its strong institutional support.⁸⁶ It is formally recognized by parliament, has a dedicated office within the building, and benefits from public endorsements by male parliamentarians who acknowledge its role in strengthening democratic practice. One factor contributing to the caucus's effectiveness is its clear internal governance and leadership structure, which has allowed it to organize efficiently and present a united front. The caucus has also cultivated robust ties with women's groups, local councils and civil society organizations, linking its work to grassroots priorities and enhancing both the reach and sustainability of its initiatives.⁸⁷ These connections, along with its participation in South–South exchanges with other African parliamentary caucuses, appear to have deepened members' understanding of, and commitment to, the gender equality agenda.⁸⁸

85 *The Guardian*, "Suffocating intimidation': female politicians in Sierra Leone on sexism and abuse", 2023.

86 Parliament of Sierra Leone (press release), "Female caucus ends leadership retreat, 2024; and Parliament of Sierra Leone (press release), "*Parliamentary female caucus inaugurates new executive and celebrates Orange Day*", 2024.

87 UN Women, *Corporate Evaluation of UN Women's Contribution to Women's Political Participation and Leadership*, 2018.

88 *The Patriotic Vanguard*, Salone News, "*Female Parliamentary Caucus presents report to President Julius Maada Bio*", 2024.

Legislative impact: The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act

The influence of the Parliamentary Women's Caucus extends beyond peer support to effective advocacy that has driven significant legislative reform. The caucus played a leading role in the passage of Sierra Leone's landmark Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, signed into law in November 2022. The Act mandates:

- prohibitions on gender-based discrimination;
- a 30% quota for women in public appointments and elected office;
- equal pay for equal work;
- fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave; and
- prohibitions on gender-based discrimination.

Despite resistance, the caucus sustained momentum through coordinated advocacy within and beyond parliament.⁸⁹ Drawing on its training in lobbying and strategic communication, the caucus successfully framed the bill as a national priority. It secured the backing of key decision-makers and built a broad, cross-party coalition that kept the bill on the agenda and shielded it from partisan pushback.

89 Harvard Ministerial Leadership Program, *Advancing Gender Equality in Sierra Leone: A Case Study*, 2025.



Sri Lanka

Women Parliamentarians' Caucus of Sri Lanka

In 2023, allegations of sexual harassment against women employees within the Parliament of Sri Lanka were reported in the media. This incident highlighted systemic vulnerabilities in parliamentary workplaces and the reluctance of victims to lodge complaints due to fear of retaliation, particularly when perpetrators held supervisory roles.

The Women Parliamentarians' Caucus, a cross-party body established in 2006 to advance gender equality and eliminate violence against women, acted immediately. The chairperson raised concerns with the secretary general, who appointed a committee of three senior female officials to investigate the matter. Victims and witnesses were invited to provide testimony confidentially, including through anonymous written submissions, recognizing the sensitivity of the issue and the power imbalance involved.

Immediate institutional response

The committee submitted its report to the secretary general, leading to charges against the accused employees. They were suspended pending two parallel investigations: internal disciplinary proceedings under the Parliamentary Staff Act and Staff Disciplinary Procedure and criminal proceedings before the courts. This swift response demonstrated the caucus's ability to catalyse accountability and institutional reform within parliament.

Preventive and supportive measures

In the aftermath, the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus partnered with the Sectoral Oversight Committee on Children, Women and Gender to publish *Know Your Rights – Preventing Sexual Harassment at the Workplace*. This handbook was launched in parliament under the patronage of the Speaker during the global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign. The handbook serves as both an awareness-raising tool and a practical guide. It includes:

- definitions and examples of sexual harassment, illustrated with cartoons for clarity;
- protocols for reporting incidents, including options for confidential and anonymous submissions;
- employer obligations under ILO Convention No. 190; and
- contact details for relevant authorities and support services.

The caucus emphasized that while measures exist against verbal and physical abuse, reluctance to act on sexual harassment persists. The handbook aims to empower women to take action and institutionalize confidential reporting systems within parliament.

Broader advocacy and networking

Beyond this incident, the caucus continues to advocate for gender-sensitive reforms, including:

- gender-responsive budgeting;
- quotas for women's representation in decision-making; and
- grassroots mobilization and capacity-building for women in politics.

The caucus works with the UNDP, UN-Women, civil society organizations and international parliamentary networks to strengthen women's political participation and eliminate gender-based violence.

The Sri Lankan experience illustrates how parliamentary caucuses can function as support groups and drivers of systemic change. By combining investigative action, awareness-raising and structural proposals, the caucus offers a model of solidarity and collaboration to address VAWP. Its initiatives demonstrate that support groups within legislatures can move beyond advocacy to deliver tangible institutional reforms.



Case-based reflections: Key enablers of effective parliamentary women's caucuses

Case-based insights show that when well-supported, parliamentary women's caucuses can play a vital role in advancing gender equality within parliaments. Beyond fostering trust across party lines, they often provide alternative spaces where marginalized perspectives, especially those rooted in women's experiences, are heard and brought into legislative conversations. Through this, they can contribute to shifting parliamentary cultures and expanding what is politically possible.

Drawing on insights from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's course on Effective Women's Parliamentary Caucuses⁹⁰ and practitioner experience, the checklist below outlines some factors that parliamentarians and development partners might consider when supporting or establishing caucuses:

→ **Clarify purpose and priorities**

Encouraging a clear, shared vision and focused goals can help caucuses align their work. Tools like member consultations, gender audits or strategy sessions may support this process and help avoid overly broad agendas.

→ **Build cross-party trust and continuity**

Trust-building activities such as retreats, informal dialogues or facilitated workshops might foster stronger relationships. Leadership rotation and agreed rules can also promote credibility and sustainability.

→ **Anchor the caucus institutionally**

Securing formal recognition within parliamentary structures, along with dedicated resources like a secretariat, staff, budget or meeting space, may strengthen the caucus's stability and influence.

→ **Connect to external stakeholders**

Engagement with civil society, academia, the media and women's movements can enhance the caucus's reach. Organizing public hearings, roundtables or joint campaigns might help amplify grassroots voices.

→ **Invest in monitoring and storytelling**

Tracking achievements and sharing progress through reports, infographics or interviews could help demonstrate impact and foster accountability.

→ **Leverage Peer Learning and Networks**

Participation in regional or international exchanges and platforms such as the IPU, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association or ParlAmericas may provide useful lessons and opportunities to share experiences.

⁹⁰ IPU, *Guidelines for Women's Caucuses*, 2013; and CPA *Parliamentary Academy Blog*, "How to start a women's parliamentary caucus in 5 stages", n.d.

2.10 Monitoring and accountability

Monitoring and accountability mechanisms are essential for ensuring that anti-violence policies are implemented and that parliaments uphold their commitments. These mechanisms may track MPs' participation in training, oversee the enforcement of internal protocols and investigate complaints. By generating data, identifying trends and documenting experiences, they also inform policy design, track progress over time and strengthen institutional accountability.

Their effectiveness depends not only on sound design but also on adequate resources and political support. Clear mandates, defined responsibilities and sufficient capacity are all critical for

oversight bodies to function as intended. Just as importantly, political will determines whether these mechanisms have real influence. Without active backing from parliament, their findings and recommendations are unlikely to lead to meaningful change.

In contexts where political will is weak or institutional independence is constrained, collaboration with civil society can be especially important. Partnerships with women's organizations, media and independent watchdogs can help extend monitoring beyond the walls of parliament, increase transparency and generate public pressure for accountability.

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UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous delivers the opening address at the 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.





Spain

Context and challenge

Many parliaments adopt gender equality plans, but few establish effective mechanisms to monitor their implementation. Even where internal oversight bodies exist, they often become inactive after initial set-up. Ensuring that gender commitments translate into institutional change requires consistent monitoring, cross-partisan buy-in and visible accountability. In this context, the Spanish Parliament offers a rare example of a functioning, sustained oversight mechanism.

The mechanism

The Oversight Committee on Equality (*Comisión de Seguimiento de la Implantación del I Plan de Igualdad de las Cortes Generales*) was established by the Spanish Parliament in 2021 to monitor the implementation of the new gender equality plan.⁹¹ Ahead of its inaugural meeting, detailed rules and procedures were adopted to define the committee's objectives, composition and operations, demonstrating a clear institutional commitment to its effective functioning.⁹²

These rules laid out a balanced and representative structure, which was subsequently implemented as planned. The committee was to be composed of 12 members: six representatives of the parliamentary administration (two from the Congress of Deputies, two from the Senate, and the deputy secretary general for administrative affairs from each chamber) and six staff representatives, chosen by the representative bodies of parliamentary staff. The rules also specified that the committee should strive for gender balance and include a clear leadership structure, with a designated chairperson and secretariat.

The committee is tasked with guiding the work of the internal equality units from both chambers and reporting on progress to the Bureau and parliamentary administration. While it is responsible for overseeing the comprehensive evaluation at the conclusion of the plan's cycle, it was intentionally established as a mechanism to support ongoing implementation and adaptation. This includes continuously proposing improvements to the plan's execution and recommending actions in response to emerging challenges or unforeseen circumstances. This approach emphasizes monitoring not just as a threat of sanctions to enforce compliance, but as a proactive process focused on learning and adapting to enhance results.

Evidence of action and impact:

Since its establishment in 2021, the committee has convened seven times. In line with established rules and procedures, minutes have been drafted and published after each meeting.⁹³ The names of the committee members are publicly available on the parliament's website, a practice that strengthens transparency and could serve as a model for other institutions seeking to enhance accountability. Meetings have also been attended by the directors of human resources and internal governance from both chambers, as well as the head of the equality units, who have been identified as responsible for the plan's implementation.

91 Senate of Spain, *Comisión de seguimiento de la implantación del I Plan de Igualdad de las Cortes Generales*.

92 Cortes Generales, *Normas de Organización y Funcionamiento de la Comisión de seguimiento del Plan de Igualdad de las Cortes Generales, aprobadas en la reunión del 16 de junio de 2021*.

93 Op. cit., see footnote 93.

Since 2021, the committee has reviewed and approved four implementation reports, documenting both achievements and ongoing challenges in the rollout of the gender equality plan.⁹⁴ These reports show measurable progress, including more inclusive recruitment practices, gender-sensitive communication protocols, and expanded training and awareness-raising efforts. In areas where change has been slower, specific plans and working groups have been set up to analyse the issues and develop new proposals. Once the first equality plan expired, the committee approved the final evaluation report, which included recommendations.⁹⁵ The negotiating committee for the drafting of the second plan has assumed the functions of the monitoring committee in overseeing equality policies.

Overall, this suggests that the committee is not only fulfilling its role as intended, and doing so with consistency and seriousness, but that implementation of the Spanish Parliament's gender equality plan is also progressing steadily. It is not difficult to see how the two may be linked.



Grounded in experience: Why this oversight mechanism works

Experience from parliamentary oversight of gender equality initiatives suggests several design features that can enhance effectiveness. While every context is unique, these considerations may help inform the development or strengthening of similar mechanisms elsewhere:

- **A clear institutional mandate:** Embedding the oversight body within formal governance structures with well-defined responsibilities helps secure its authority and ensures its recommendations are taken seriously.
- **Stable, cross-functional membership:** Including both elected representatives and senior administrative staff fosters continuity, encourages collaboration across political and bureaucratic lines and balances diverse perspectives.
- **Integration with implementation teams:** Involving the units responsible for delivering the plan, such as human resources, equality offices or internal governance, facilitates coordination and more effective problem-solving.
- **Focus on concrete benchmarks:** Structuring oversight around specific goals and timelines supports a results-oriented approach, making progress easier to track and assess.
- **Regular and transparent reporting:** Publishing meeting minutes and progress reports promotes accountability, sustains momentum and invites broader engagement.
- **Emphasis on learning and adaptation:** Framing oversight as an ongoing process of reflection and adjustment, rather than mere compliance monitoring, encourages responsiveness and continuous improvement.
- **Public identification of members:** Making committee membership transparent can strengthen accountability and inspire trust among stakeholders.

These elements, individually and collectively, suggest that oversight bodies can do more than simply track compliance; they can foster a culture of shared responsibility, active learning and sustained progress toward gender equality goals.

94 Senate of Spain, *Informes anuales de seguimiento de la implantación del I Plan de Igualdad de las Cortes Generales*.

95 Senate of Spain, *Protocolo de actuación frente al acoso sexual, al acoso por razón de sexo y frente a todas las formas de acoso y violencia en las Cortes Generales Evaluación final de la implantación del I Plan de Igualdad de las Cortes Generales, 2024*.

3. Conclusions

Violence against women in politics is not an inevitable feature of democratic life – it is a structural problem, and one that parliaments have both the responsibility and capacity to address.

This publication has documented how parliaments across diverse regional and political contexts have begun to do exactly that: through self-regulation and codes of conduct, complaints and reporting mechanisms, legal reform, training, advocacy, measures against technology-facilitated violence, support services, physical protection, solidarity networks, and monitoring and accountability frameworks. Together, these responses constitute a rich and growing body of institutional practice, one that offers tangible reference points for parliaments and their partners as they seek to make political life safer and more equitable for women.

The case studies in this report illustrate that parliaments vary widely in their appetite and readiness for reform. What they also show is that progress rarely begins with sweeping transformation: it starts with entry points, whether modest or ambitious, that over time can open pathways to deeper cultural and institutional change. By capturing this diversity of approaches and conditions, the study demonstrates that there is no single blueprint, but that progress is possible even in challenging contexts.

The analysis highlights two common pathways through which reform has tended to occur. The first is in response to a high-profile and norm-breaking event that draws public attention to previously under-addressed problems. While such events are rarely isolated (they often reflect deeper, longer-standing issues), they can serve as a tipping point, triggering national debate and generating cross-party support for reform. The second pathway is more incremental: a small group of committed actors, often women MPs, build momentum through sustained advocacy, internal organizing and careful coalition building over time. What unites these approaches is that both are deeply political. Reform does not happen in a vacuum; it requires negotiation, compromise and collective effort. This underscores the importance of not depoliticizing the issue of violence against women in politics. It also requires acknowledging the

institutional, strategic and power-laden dynamics that shape whether reforms succeed or fail.

Across the case studies, several cross-cutting lessons emerge:

First, there is no single blueprint for reform. The pathways to change are shaped by institutional history, political context and the actors who champion or resist reform. What works in one parliament may need significant adaptation elsewhere.

Second, progress is rarely linear. Reforms unfold through iteration – initial steps, setbacks, refinements – and require sustained political will and institutional commitment over time.

Third, the most effective responses tend to be those that address violence comprehensively, combining prevention, accountability and support, and that are embedded in formal structures rather than dependent on individual champions.

Fourth, external actors – including international organizations, civil society and development partners – can play a critical catalytic role, particularly in providing technical support, creating space for cross-parliamentary learning, and sustaining attention to reform even when political momentum wanes.

The digital dimension of VAWP deserves particular attention going forward. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence has emerged as one of the fastest-growing and most pervasive forms of harassment experienced by women in political life, yet institutional responses remain nascent and fragmented. Parliaments, regulators and civil society will need to work together to close the gap between the pace of technological change and the development of effective protective frameworks – frameworks that address both online and offline manifestations of violence in an integrated way.

Technical measures – however well-crafted – are necessary but not sufficient. What ultimately determines whether reforms take root is the slower, harder work of cultural transformation and day-to-day practice. Recognizing that meaningful progress takes time, and that it relies on building trust, political will and shared responsibility, may help sustain the momentum needed to make parliamentary politics safer, more inclusive and more representative for all.

Ultimately, addressing VAWP is inseparable from the broader project of democratic renewal. Parliaments that fail to protect women from harassment and violence are not only failing their members and staff – they are failing the citizens they represent and the democratic values they are meant to

embody. Conversely, those that rise to this challenge send a powerful signal about the kind of institutions they aspire to be: accountable, inclusive and genuinely representative of the societies they serve.

The IPU and the UNDP remain committed to supporting parliaments on this journey – through knowledge, technical assistance and sustained partnership. The experiences documented in this publication demonstrate that change is possible. What they also show is that it requires courage, persistence and collective effort. The work of making parliamentary politics safe for women is, in the deepest sense, the work of making democracy work for everyone.

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Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.