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**Violence Against Women in Politics within the European
Parliament: Mechanisms, Experiences and Institutional
Responses.**

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This thesis began in a classroom in Brussels

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List of Abbreviations

GBV	Gender-Based Violence
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MPs	Members of Parliament
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
EP	European Parliament
TVAP	Targeted Violence Against Politicians
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
VAP	Violence Against Politicians
VAWIP	Violence Against Women in Politics
WHA	World Health Assembly
WHO	World Health Organization
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
NDI	National Democratic Institute
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
EPP	European People's Party
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party
S&D	Socialists and Democrats

Abstract

Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP) is not a new phenomenon. VAWIP is a form of gender-based violence that takes place within the political sphere, a particular dynamic that reflects a structural barrier to women's full participation and engagement in political life. Despite scholarship has documented for long time sexual harassment, online abuses and gendered hostility targeting female politicians, often, was not enough. Yet, the main scholars' mistake has been to examine the phenomenon in isolation, rather than studying it within specific institutional environments. The focus of this thesis is the European Parliament (EP), a paradoxical institution. Formally, the EP is one of the most gender equal legislative bodies existing, an actor devoted to democracy that promotes equality driven mechanisms, with an historical commitment toward gender equality. Despite this, evidence shows that sexism and gendered hostility are still perpetrated within its walls. Attention is required also in analysing how different forms of violence, occurring both online and offline, affect politicians across the European legislative institution, trying to understand how these are able to shape lived experiences and the political use of agency. It is precisely this gap that the present research tries to address: the divide between what the institution formally promotes and what female members (MEPs) experience.

The central question driving this thesis is: *how does Violence Against Women in Politics operate within the European Parliament, and through which mechanisms does it shape the political agency and political participation of female Members of the European Parliament?*

Drawing on a qualitative case study methodology, this thesis combines the document analysis of seven key institutional texts produced between 2018 and 2026, along with semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven Italian female MEPs, conducted between April and May 2026. These two methods are applied through five thematic categories: Offline forms of VAWIP, Online dimension of VAWIP, Behavioural responses and silencing effect, Institutional responses and formal mechanisms and Implementation gap. In that way, this method will allow for a systematic comparison between the institutional narrative and the lived experiences of female MEPs.

Findings will reveal that VAWIP operated within the EP on two distinct registers: inside the Institution across subtler and normalised dynamics, and outside the Institution, where the online violence emerges as the most impactful and least institutionally addressed dimension of VAWIP. Every participant reported having experienced gendered cyberviolence, from citizens or political opponents, rendering the institutional internal governance as structurally irrelevant to address this form of violence. This research identifies a central paradox. The European Parliament has produced many ambitious legislative instruments addressing gender-based cyberviolence across the world. Despite this, it has not extended the same logic to the protection of its own Members. The implementation gap documented in the corpus is then confirmed from the inside by the MEPs. All respondents across the full range of the political spectrum described pretty much the same dynamics, used the same language and reached the same conclusions: formal rules are necessary but insufficient. Meaningful change requires addressing informal norms and to the institutional culture, which the current instruments cannot reach.

Introduction

This thesis began in a classroom in Brussels.

During an Erasmus semester at Vrije Universiteit Brussels (VUB) 2025/2026, I attended a course named Gender, Diversity and Politics, taught by Professor Karen Celis. Where, every week, a researcher was invited to present her work. Here, it was through two of those presentations that the question driving this thesis first was developed.

Anne Van Bavel introduced me to the study of Violence Against Women in Politics as a structural and global phenomenon, she documented how gendered hostility operates as a systematic mechanism of exclusion across political contexts. Valentine Berthet, then, brought that conversation inside the European Parliament. She explained its internal dynamics, its formal commitments to gender equality, and the nature of its parties. Sitting in that room, I thought about: supposing that VAWIP is a structural phenomenon of almost every political Institution across the world, acknowledging the EP's formal commitment to gender equality, what happens when you look for it inside the EP itself? Right here emerged the gap in literature that this thesis is focused on.

Violence Against Women in Politics has been documented ¹ across many political levels, from local council, national parliaments to supranational institutions. It functions as one of the most effective structural barriers to women's full participation to political life. Not because of what they do, but because of what they are: women in a space that was not designed for them. Consequences are measurable: women self censor, their retreat from public visibility and the abandonment of their political careers.

In this sense, the European Parliament occupies a particular position. The EP is the only directly elected Institution of the European Union. It has adopted many progressive resolutions addressing gender equality and Gender Based Violence (GBV) ^{2 3}, differentiating

¹ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Violence against women in politics. A defense of the concept*. *Política y gobierno*, 23(2).

² European Parliamentary research service. (2021). *Combating gender-based violence: Cyber violence. European added value assessment*. (EPRS_STU(2021)662621). European Parliament. (2021) *European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on combating gender-based violence: cyberviolence (2020/2035(INL))*. (P9_TA(2021)0489).

³ European Parliament. (2023). *European Parliament resolution of 1 June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and MeToo evaluation*. (2022/2138(INI)). P9_TA(2023)0217, *Official Journal of the European Union*. (C/2023/1224), 21 December 2023.

from any other European institution. Moreover, the EP has also produced one of the most ambitious tools to combat cyberviolence against women in the world: EPRS *Combating gender-based violence: Cyber violence*. It has a Committee committed to Women's Rights and Gender Equality, a mandatory (since 2024) anti-harassment training programme, a Code of Appropriate Behaviour and a sanctions framework. It is, without any doubts, an institution that takes gender equality seriously. Despite this, the Resolution of 1st June 2023 *on sexual harassment in the EU and MeToo evaluation*, acknowledged that it remains an unsafe workplace.

This thesis investigates how Violence Against Women in Politics operates within the European Parliament, through which mechanisms it shapes the political agency and participation of female MEPs, and how the institution's formal responses affect both the persistence of the problem and women's trust in institutional protection. It does so by combining two qualitative methods: the analysis of seven key institutional documents produced between 2018 and 2026, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven Italian female Members of the European Parliament conducted between April and May 2026. The choice to focus on Italian female MEPs was guided by both methodological and practical considerations as the shared language and familiarity with the Italian political context. However, the findings are not confined to the national Italian perspective. Participants represents the full range of the Italian political spectrum, from the radical left to the right. They all described the same institutional dynamics, identified the same structural gaps and reached the same conclusions about the distance between formal commitment and lived reality. While the sample is composed by Italian female MEPs, the dynamics they describe are consistent with the European literature on VAWIP ^{4 5} and with the institutional corpus analysed in Chapter 4. In this sense, the Italian framework serves as a contextual point.

The thesis is organised into five chapters, followed by the conclusions.

Chapter 1 establishes political violence in its full nature, from physical coercion to symbolic exclusion. Chapter 2 builds the theoretical framework through Feminist Institutionalism and the work of Krook & Restrepo Sanin (2016), Berthet (2022) and Berthet & Kantola (2021). It introduces the EP as the place where this framework will be tested. Chapter 3 describes the

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*.

⁵ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Violence against women in politics. A defense of the concept*. *Política y gobierno*, 23(2).

methodology: the qualitative case study approach, the document corpus and the interview sample, the thematic analysis applied across both, and the ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the document analysis. It traces what the seven institutional texts produced between 2018 and 2026 address and what they omit. The analysis moves across five thematic areas: Offline violence, Online violence, Behavioural responses, Institutional mechanisms and the Implementation gap. Chapter 5 shows the interview findings. It set the institutional narrative against what female Italian MEPs experienced and reported. It examines what politicians confirm and what deny about document records.

The Conclusions draw the two analyses together. Returning to the research questions, it assess the thesis's theoretical contributions and propose concrete recommendations for an institutional reform.

1. Violence in the Political Sphere

Political Violence has become a defining feature of contemporary political life, affecting different actors across many different levels of governance, all over the world. While violence has always been traditionally associated with extreme violent acts, such as murders and terrorism, today, violence in the political sphere is commonly including acts like intimidation, harassment, symbolic delegitimization and digital hostility. Compounded of a universe of ever-changing forms and dynamics. Yet, what is urgent to realize is that these forms of violence do not merely target individuals, rather, political violence is able to reshape people's representation and politics itself.

The following sections provides some conceptual clarity to understand the broader phenomenon of violence within the political sphere. Exemplifying the way in which violence operates within the political context, this chapter will also represent who targets and actors involved are, before examining its gendered dimensions and its institutional manifestations.

Furthermore, this chapter will also provide a wide and solid theoretical framework to analyse political violence. From the definition of the broader concept, displayed by Krug et al. (2002), to the understanding of its elements (Hamby, Sherry 2017) and key components (Zamfir, 2025). The basis that will be provided in this first chapter, will then serve to trace political violence evolution. From traditionally open physical coercion to the nowadays' more widespread form, the digital.

1.1. Defining Violence

Violence has always been part of human history and civic experience. But today the human suffering is still not possible to calculate. Deaths resulting from violence are probably the most visible manifestation of a broader problem: physical and sexual assaults occur with high daily frequency. Despite the visible violence that we are used to see, hear and comment, there is also much more that occurs every day, hiding in homes, workplaces, institutions. The term “Violence” is not always easy to define, despite its widespread and multifaced presence in our daily lives, it is a wide and vast concept whose definition must take into account its nuances. In trying to define this notion, this thesis aligns with the World Health Organization’s (WHO) delineation of “Violence” of 1996, as related by Krug et al. in the *World Report on Violence & Health* in 2002.

Violence is:

<< The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. >>⁶

Essentially, we need to understand violence as those acts and threats that are able to cause damage and loss. While there is no single, perfect, way to define violence in absolute terms, the WHO’s one is broad enough to include many different aspects of the current problem. This definition is crucial because it expands the traditional and narrow focus on simple physical assault, it captures both “Force” and “Power”, moving the concept beyond the purely physical act; violence is also coercion, intimidation and harm; it is describing a complex range of acts which are still today applicable, even if the medium have changed.

The *World Report on Violence and Health* was the first comprehensive publication of its kind, the result of three years of work, whose context aimed to respond to the Forty-Ninth World Health Assembly (WHA) in 1996 declaring Violence as *<< a major and growing worldwide public health problem >>⁷*. The scope of the report was to better understand how violence works, as well as its impact on our societies, stealing the subject from the domain of justice to share it with all sectors of society, in prevention efforts; with the main goal to raise awareness upon the global issue.

⁶ Krug, E.G., Mercy, J.A., Dahlberg, L.L. and Zwi, A.B., (2002). *The world report on violence and health*. The lancet, 360(9339), pp.1084

⁷ Ivi p. XX

A deeper analysis of violence is possible by explaining the conceptual definition given by WHO, which formulation allow us to highlight some key components, already mentioned:

The association with *Intentionality*, which, even if culturally determined ⁸, excludes from the definition all unintended acts, an intentional act of violence is irrespective of the outcome produced. This is a crucial criterion, establishing a clear difference between deliberate acts of violence and incident, which might also cause harm, but in lack of intention. Then, the use of the word *Power* in “use of physical force and power” serve in broadening the issue, including << *those acts that result from a power relationship, including threats and intimidation [...]* neglect or acts of omission >> ⁹. That phrase must be understood broadly: it encompasses both direct and indirect forms of omission, including the full spectrum of physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

Moreover, to extensively explain the phenomena, it comes necessary to refer to Hamby’s *on Defining Violence* article ¹⁰. Here, the researcher combines essential elements from the numerous, and usually conflicting definitions of violence, to develop four key features which accurately describe an act as violent. Violence is: Intentional, Unwanted, Non-Essential and Harmful.

Intentionality; results as a vital element to separate a violent act from an accident or unintended harm. A violent action is not an accident, the perpetrator must have the intent to commit it, and it must be performed with the intent to exert power of force upon oneself or another person.

Unwantedness; address the issue of consent, the victim does not want to live the violence. The forceful act is not desired or neither consented by the target.

Non-Essentiality; address to an act of force which is not necessary and not essential to preserve health, neither to ensure safety or to legitimate self-defence. This concept is clearly excluding necessary medical procedures and the use of proportionate force in self-defence, to the extent, an act can be defined as violent only if a non-harmful alternative is available or the force used was excessive.

⁸ Walters RH, Parke RD. (1964) *Social motivation, dependency, and susceptibility to social influence*. In: Berkowitz L, ed. *Advances in experimental social psychology*. Vol. 1. Academic Press, 231–276.

⁹ Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, Zwi. (2002) *The world report on violence and health*. The lancet, 360 p.5

¹⁰ Hamby, Sherry. (2017) *On defining violence, and why it matters*. *Psychology of Violence*, Vol 7(2)

Harmfulness; reflect that the intended behaviour must result in measurable harm, which means both physical and non-physical forms, including psychological, sexual, social and symbolic attempts.

The 1996 Resolution WHA49.24 by the World Health Assembly, finally declaring violence as one of the main health problems of the globe, did not limit to let the World Health Organization develop a clear definition of what actually violence is, indeed, the WHO was called on to characterize the different types of violence existing. The proposal split the acts into three broad categories, according to the perpetrators' characteristics ¹¹:

Self- Directed Violence; inflicted upon him/herself, guided by suicidal behaviour and self-abuse.

Interpersonal Violence; inflicted by another individual or by a small group.

- a. Family and Intimate Violence: violence which takes place between family members or intimate partners, usually at home but not exclusively there.
- b. Community Violence: violence that takes place between unrelated individuals, who may know each other or not. Includes random acts of violence, rape, sexual assault by strangers, violence at schools, workplaces, prisons...

Collective Violence; inflicted by a larger group (States, Organized Political Groups, Militia Groups or Terrorists)

- a. Social Violence: crimes of hate.
- b. Political Violence: war and conflicts.
- c. Economic Violence: with the purposes of denying access to essential services, disrupting economic activity or creating divisions.

Figure 7 shows the pluralistic nature of violent acts, described by the WHO, which occur in each of the categories and subcategories already mentioned.

¹¹ Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, Zwi. (2002) *The world report on violence and health*. The lancet, 360 p.6

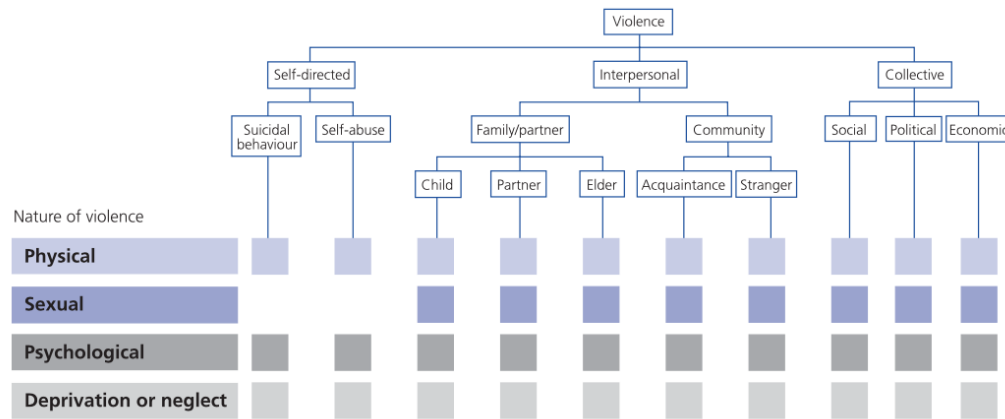


Figure 1. Classification Nature of Violence (Krug et al., The report on violence and health p.7)

While broad definitions, such as the one provided by the WHO, are essential for establishing a common ground of knowledge and the extensive scope of violence, those serve essentially as a conceptual starting point, to better understand the specific exposure of the violence phenomena into the politics realm. Krug et al.'s framework is foundational, but still developed in 2002. This means that is prior to the widespread digitalisation that changed our world, so, it is also prior to the emergence of cyberviolence as a distinct phenomenon.

It is not taking into account two dimensions that are central for this thesis, as the online and the symbolic dimensions. These two are today needed to understand how Violence Against Women in Politics operates in contemporary democracies. After all, these comprehensive frameworks are essential, but not that sufficient for the specialized analysis upon which this research is based on. The focus must now shift from this starting point of violence as a general phenomenon, to its narrow manifestation within the political sphere. Therefore, what follows will adopt a more contextualized definition of Political Violence.

1.2 Violence in Politics

Before starting, this chapter needs a conceptual clarification. Terms *Political Violence* and *Violence in Politics* refer to different phenomena, even if used interchangeably in literature.

Political Violence is traditionally used to address organised and motivated acts like terrorism or armed conflicts, usually directed at the achieving of precise objectives through the use of the force ¹². In contrast, Violence in Politics is understood as a broader category which contains any acts of violence that occur within the political sphere. This thesis adopts the more broader concept of violence in politics, as including both the personal the the structural, the online and the offline dimensions that violence could take.

Rather than being isolated phenomena, violence and harassment are situated on a continuum, which means that they manifest across many social domains, spanning various social and intimate spheres. Violence against politicians, or people actively engaging in politics, it is something that should concern everyone. Whether are female or male politicians the target of violence, we need to understand that those acts are << *One of the major obstacles to the exercise of political rights and freedoms, and a serious violation of basic human rights.* >> ¹³ and again, according to WHO, Political Violence is claimed to be << *The deliberate use of force or intimidation by state or non-state actors to achieve political objectives* >> ¹⁴.

Political Violence is generally defined as the threatened use of the physical force or power, by a state or non-state actor, against a person, property or government, with the aim to achieve a political objective, to maintain power or to challenge existing political order. Essentially, what distinguish political violence from the general definition of violence are: Purpose, Target and Objectives ¹⁵. This concept remains at the intersection between two points: the use of force and the pursuit of a political end, it is fundamentally distinct from social and criminal violence due to its manifestation across a wide spectrum of interactions between the perpetrator and the victim. Uppsala Conflict Data Program ¹⁶ (UCDP), provides the evidence that Political Violence is mainly organized in three categories:

¹² Kalyvas, S.N., 2006. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Zamfir, I., (2025). *Violence against Women Active in Politics in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February. p. 2

¹⁴ *Ibidem*

¹⁵ Kalyvas, S.N., 2006. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ Melander, E., 2015. *Organized violence in the world 2015: An assessment by the Uppsala conflict data program*.p.2

- *State Violence*; perpetrated by actors such as State Governments, military or Police forces which acts against their own citizens, political opponents, internal minorities or other states' populations in repressing their dissent, even leading them to torture or death as well.
- *Non-State Violence*; performed by rebel groups, terrorists or armed groups against civilians, state infrastructures and government symbols in form of insurrections, civil wars and terrorist attacks.
- *Inter-Group Violence*; carried out by rival political factions or ethnic groups against members of the opposing wings or their base, mostly in the shape of clashes between militias.

As we can clearly observe, Political Violence is not an end in itself, rather, it is a tool used to achieve strategic goals to influence, subvert or maintain power, as well as a vehicle to intimidate and constrain governments or destroy the State infrastructures, probably with the aim to undermine legitimacy. In general, Political Violence reveals to be complex and multifaced, deeply intertwined with power relations and social conflicts. Despite the definite categories observed, we must consider that those are frequently overlapping, reinforcing one another and constantly changing. It is exactly from this complexity that arises the need to focus on more specific evidence of the problem: Targeted Political Violence (TVP). In recent years, the scholar's attention has focus more to smaller-scale forms of political violence, which are focusing on individualized episodes, targeting specific people who hold political and institutional roles.

The methodological choice to focus on a more pervasive manifestation of violence in politics, the targeted one, is justified by the acknowledging of its systemic impact, as well as its manifestation within the contemporary democracies. Many research ¹⁷ ¹⁸ highlight two main broad categories of consequences of the growing violent attacks against people in politics:

- a. Significant negative impacts on political lives
- b. Challenges to democratic process

¹⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*.

¹⁸ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Violence against women in politics. A defense of the concept*. *Política y gobierno*, 23(2).

Then, which is the definition of Targeted Violence in Politics? For the purpose of this thesis, TVP or VAP (Violence Against Politicians) is defined as any act of threat, harassment, coercion, physical harm or symbolic damage which is directly addressed against specific political actors. Those latter are elected representatives, candidates, activists or members of a political staff, attacked because of their public role, affiliation, policies or identity. This definition synthetizes the core elements highlighted by many research based on political intimidation, democratic erosion and violence against women in politics, such as the numerous reports published by the Council of Europe and OSCE, reporting violence against people in office, focusing on identity-based targeting, but also supported by researchers such as Mona Lena Krook. Violence against politicians constitutes a significant barrier to the exercise of political fundamental human rights, no matter if specifically targeting men or women ¹⁹. An academic study inside “*Perspective on Terrorism*” ²⁰ examining the extend and the implications of harassment and threat directed to elected officials in Norway, highlights how those acts collaborate in weakening democracy. The harm caused to politician’s personal lives causes them stress, fear and emotional strain which affect their political activity, making harder for them to do their jobs efficiently. Clearly, this translates into broader democratic problems, due that a functioning Democracy requires that both, citizens and politicians, can freely express their opinion. Not only the freedom of people who live intimidations, threats or violence is obviously limited, but the political debate and decision-making quality is also lowering.

Furthermore, in order to deeply analyse the phenomenon of VAP in a systematic way, it is now necessary to distinguish and to better investigate the different actors involved. The following section offers a classification of perpetrators, victims, objectives and scope of such violence, such points will serve as an analytical foundation for the subsequent parts of the thesis.

¹⁹ Zamfir, I. (2025). *Violence against women active in politics in the EU: a serious obstacle to political participation*. (PE 759.600) European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2025.

²⁰ Bjørge, T., Jupskås, A. R., Thomassen, G., & Strype, J. (2022). *Patterns and Consequences of Threats towards Politicians*. *Perspectives on terrorism*, 16(6), 100-119.

1.2.1. Targeted Political Violence and its Key Components

Within the broader category of Violence in Politics, this thesis proposes to specifically address Targeted Political Violence (TPV). This concept is then distinguishing identity based forms of political violence from the collective forms which are traditionally associated with this term. TPV specifically refers to attacks directed to specific individuals, due to their identity, their political position or their gender. This stands as a crucial distinction for this thesis as it address the violence experienced by female MEPs within and beyond the European parliament, not as organised violence but as identity-based one.

Then, a comprehensive understanding of VAP requires an examination of its core components. There are three key dimensions which need to be clarify, in order to grasp the dynamics of contemporary forms of political violence:

1. The roles of perpetrators.
2. The nature of the target.
3. The objectives.

1. The Nature of Perpetrators

Perpetrators of violence against politicians are a diverse range of actors responsible for political violence and violent acts. Those agents are the ones that employ force or threats for their political or ideological purposes. That is, the broader group of perpetrators can be disjoined into three other categories:

a. Citizens

Non-organised and non-institutionalised actors which are behaving like private individuals as they are. Citizens represent the broadest and most heterogeneous category of perpetrators of political violence. This group includes people who act independently and who direct threats, harassment or violence toward political actors for a wide range of reasons: personal, ideological or even emotional cause. Their actions could be both spontaneous or premeditated, even persistent, always driven by strong political attitudes, personal grievances or psychological vulnerability ²¹. Furthermore, in contemporary democracies, citizens are able to engage with political violence both online and offline, using direct contact or social

²¹ Hoel, M., Vartia, M., (2018). *Bullying and sexual harassment at the workplace, in public spaces, and in political life in the EU*. Policy department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs. (PE 604.949)

media; where today everyone has the power to intimidate, insult or threaten elected officials. While their actions may appear isolated, it is the cumulative effect that should warn us, the power of citizen-driven intimidation today can significantly undermine democratic participation and the safety of representatives.²²

Despite this general introduction to citizens addressing violence, we need to include into this broader category all the actors which are perpetrating violence as individuals, or better, as non-organised and non-institutionalised groups, without being part of any organisation or having formal political role neither. Such as:

Citizens and general public, including private citizens who engage insulting and threatening politicians, but also bullies and stalkers targeting public officials. But also, *small groups of individuals*, which consist of small and informal groups, often made by occasional partnership who commit acts of interpersonal violence toward people in office.

And again, *online actors and trolls* in the digital sphere, whose intent is foremost to annoy and upset people, these are included into the Mantilla's²³ definition of "generic trolls", but let's not forgot about "gender trolls" who employ graphic, sexualized and gender-based insults to intimidate women specifically, discouraging their participation. Subsequently, social media enables also the dissemination of abusive and threatening messages anonymously, allowing perpetrators to harass politicians with limited accountability (Hoel, Helge, Maarit; 2018).

*Individuals with personal grievance*²⁴, as well, are those actors who target politicians because of their personal conflicts, they could be upset by public services as well as affected by personal disputes. Finally, *mentally unsound or fixated individuals*²⁵, are that subgroup which includes people whose actions are influenced by mental health issues, obsessive behaviour or conspiracy-driven concern.

b. Organised Groups

It is a cluster of actors that operate collectively, often with formal or informal structure and shared identity. Unlike the individual perpetrators, these actors carry out violence as a

²² Hoel, Helge, and Maarit Vartia. (2018) *Bullying and Sexual Harassment at the Workplace, in Public Spaces, and in Political Life in the EU: Study*. European Parliament.

²³ Mantilla, K. (2015). *Gendertrolling*.

²⁴ Bjørge, T., Jupskås, A. R., Thomassen, G., & Strype, J. (2022). *Patterns and Consequences of Threats towards Politicians*. Perspectives on terrorism, 16(6), p.114

²⁵ Ivi p. 101

coordinated effort, targeting specific actors to achieve political, ideological or even criminal objectives ²⁶. Thanks to the “*World Report on Violence and Health*” ²⁷ it is possible to categorize those actors into three subcategories, first, *state actors* are those government-affiliated groups who can commit targeted violence against politicians such as authoritarian regimes, using repression and surveillance, harassment and even detention to neutralise challengers, but also security forces, who target specific elected officials, activist or candidates to maintain political control. Then, *organised non-state groups*, such as militias, terrorist or extremist organizations, organised crime groups and radicalised political collectives, finally, the *coordinated collective actors*, which include larger networks able to coordinate campaigns of intimidation or violence against the target chosen.

c. Rival Political Elites

The third set of perpetrators of violence against politicians consists of the rival political élites, which means, those actors operating within the political system who possess institutional power. As the study requested by FEMM²⁸The Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality mention, the main components of this group are party leaders, senior figures, colleagues or competitors within the same or across other parties. Unlike citizens or the organized groups, we mentioned before, whose violence is originating outside the formal institutions, violence perpetrated by those élites is embedded in the intra-institutional dynamics of power struggles and competition.

Many scholars define political elites resorting to various types of violence with the aim to undermine the opponents’ credibility, to limit their access to resources or to strategically exclude them from having political influence.

The Introduction to the *European Conference of Presidents of Parliament* which took place in Strasbourg, on March 20th 2025, clearly claims:

<< In 2024, physical attacks by members of parliament against their colleagues took place in several parliaments in Council of Europe member States, damaging both the work and the credibility of national parliaments. Harassment against political opponents participating in demonstrations is another frequent form of violence against politicians.>>²⁹

²⁶ Krug, E. G., Mercy, J. A., Dahlberg, L. L., & Zwi, A. B. (2002). *The world report on violence and health*. The Lancet, 360(9339), 1083-1088.

²⁷ Bjørge, T., Jupskås, A. R., Thomassen, G., & Strype, J. (2022). *Patterns and Consequences of Threats towards Politicians. Perspectives on terrorism*, 16(6), p.101

²⁸ Hoel, H., & Vartia, M. *Bullying and Sexual Harassment at the Workplace, in Public Spaces, and in Political Life in the EU: Study*. European Parliament, (2018).

²⁹ European Conference of Presidents of Parliament. *Violence Against Politicians*. Background Document. Council of Europe, (2025) . p.1

Whether it is physical, psychological or symbolic, such violence can take subtle and highly consequential forms: verbal aggression during debates, disinformation, social exclusion within party structures, obstruction to work as well as threats and harassment.³⁰ These practices are not far from the radar of security frameworks, they occur within the political arena, where aggressive behaviour is easily normalized as part of competition. However, elite-driven violence is particularly damaging for democratic institutions, as already mentioned, violence erodes norms of mutual respect, undermining trust and distorting political representation.

Even though these dynamics affect politicians of all genders and ethnicity, research that will be later largely discussed, shows that women and ethnic minority politicians are way more targeted by elite perpetrators. Delegitimization, exclusion and attacks are just few mechanisms to reinforce the established hierarchies ³¹.

2. The Nature of Target

The *Target* of VAP is not a casual individual, rather, is a person who holds, or seek to hold, a public and political role. Nonetheless, the main point that distinguishes VAP from other forms of interpersonal violence is the role-based nature of the target, for this reason, politicians are easily becoming victims because of their position, their political function and the visibility they gain. Being engaged in public and political life, rise the risk of exposure to violence and intimidation of many figures at local, national and international level.

The local level is a key frontline for political violence, it is constituted by Administrators such as mayors, local or city councillors, which means that << *Local government officials are individuals who are part of subnational government institutions, ranging from first-level administration divisions down to cities, towns, and villages.* >> ³² and again, << *local officials find themselves in the 'firing line'; violence against them is used as an expression of opposition and growing disenchantment with national policies, or to secure private or organized interests locally.* >>³³ Nonetheless, their status of most proximate politicians to citizenship allows those latter to easily address physical violence and verbal threats, specially during election periods. ACLED's 2023 annual report ³⁴ about violence against local officials

³⁰ Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence and intimidation against politicians in the EU*. European Parliamentary Research Service, October. p. 2

³¹ Ivi p.3

³² Bernardi G. , Martinez T., June 2023. *Special Issue on the targeting of Locals Officials: The EU*. Report by ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/report/special-issue-targeting-local-officials-eu>

³³ *Ibidem*

³⁴ *Ibidem*

highlighted 2.500 attacks against politicians, around 94 countries, in the same year. Despite those data are broadly descriptive of the globe, EU Member States raise concern as well. The already mentioned global monitor, whose aim is to collect and analyse data on conflicts and protests, shared also evidence of violence against local and provincial office holders in the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and France, which <<accounts for nearly 60% of all events recorded in the EU in 2023>>³⁵. A trend identified also by the *Rapport d'activité 2023-2025 du Centre d'analyse et de Lutte Contre les Atteintes aux élus* (CALAE):

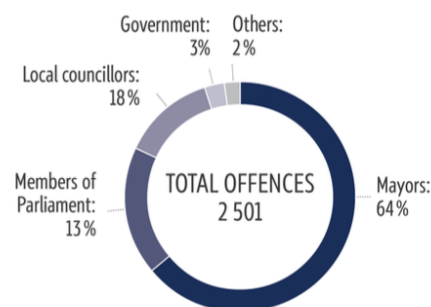


Figure 2. Percentage of Victims Within Different Institutional Levels in France in 2024 (CALAE; 2023-2025)³⁶

Similarly, Elected Representatives at the national level are targeted too, this kind of figure encompasses the highest political and legislative authorities within a country. This is the central category of targets in VAP, constituted by MPs, ministers and high profile party officials. Despite in the European Union, incidents of extreme violence such as murder or attempt to, remain relatively rare compared to other regions of the world, every day abuses, threats and intimidation are addressed at higher levels of political representation; severe physical attempt might be infrequent, but they are not isolated phenomenal, highlighting the everyday risks that politicians face within contemporary democracies. As it is clear, VAP does not affect all political actors equally, the exposure is significantly depending on features such as political role and position in the political hierarchy. As pointed out by EPRS in *Violence and Intimidation Against Politicians in the EU* << In recent years, murders and attempted murders of elected representatives have prompted a stark awakening to the reality of this issue >>³⁷. Nonetheless, due to the centrality of democratic decision-making and the

³⁵ Bernardi G. , Martinez T., June 2023. *Special Issue on the targeting of Locals Officials: The EU*. Report by ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/report/special-issue-targeting-local-officials-eu>

³⁶ CALAE *Rapport D'activité 2023-2025*

³⁷ Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence and intimidation against politicians in the EU*. European Parliamentary Research Service, October. p. 2

highly public visibility, national legislators are extremely vulnerable to citizens' hostile behaviour, whose intents are meant to delegitimize their role.

Survey research ³⁸ reinforces this picture: in Norway, surveys of parliamentarians and cabinet ministers identify those groups as experiencing the highest number of unwanted incidents. Nine out of ten (87%) respondents reported at least one incident of harassment, intimidation or threat, directed to them due to their political role.

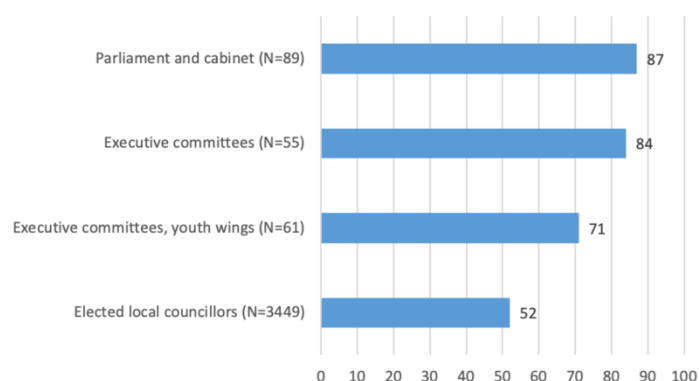


Figure 3 Proportion of Respondents Reporting One or More Incidents of Harassment or Threats in Norway (Bjørge et al., 2022) ³⁹

Then, High-Level Office Holders, including heads of states, heads of governments and ministers represent politically consequential targets of violence as well. Those political actors enduty of national power, are often exposed to extreme violence, due to their decision-making authority and continuous public exposure, which make them vulnerable to both, physical violence and persistent forms of verbal and symbolic aggression. While lethal incidents and death remain rare in Europe compared to other parts of the globe, their recurrence carry a significant political weight; sustaining this thesis, recent events illustrate this exposure: Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico, who survived a killing attempt in 2024, drew international attention and concern over the safety of officials ⁴⁰. Furthermore, those illustrative actors are also frequent subjects of media attention and online comments, which increase the channels through which hostility can be expressed and where they are commonly subject of fake news, and exposed to harassment and threats. While Krug et al.'s framework provides a foundational explanation of violence, it must be acknowledged that it was

³⁸ Bjørge, T., Jupskås, A. R., Thomassen, G., & Strype, J. (2022). *Patterns and Consequences of Threats towards Politicians*. Perspectives on terrorism, 16(6), p. 102

³⁹ *Ibidem*

⁴⁰ Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence and intimidation against politicians in the EU*. European Parliamentary Research Service, October. p. 2

developed before the digital era. For this reason, it does not adequately address the online dimension of political violence.

On the other hand, the category of targeted political actors exposed to political violence, upon which the next chapters will focus on, is that of Supranational Legislators. This rank, mostly constituted by Members of the European Parliament, operate in a highly visible transnational arena where, while not facing the same level of physical risk as the previous categories, they are found to be vulnerable to online abuse, hate speech, intimidation and disinformation campaigns. Their political work often intersect with salient and polarising issues such as migration, gender equality, rule of law and climate, making them an appealing target for hostile behaviour driven by a wide range of actors.

A study about the online hate against MEPs comments:

<<77% of all male MEPs and 66% of all female MEPs who participated in the survey reported that they had been affected by online hate directed towards them at some point in their political career>>

⁴¹

Despite this, MEPs still maintain online presence, due to the demand for supranational representation and communication, even if the visibility increase without any doubt their exposure to harassment on social media platforms.

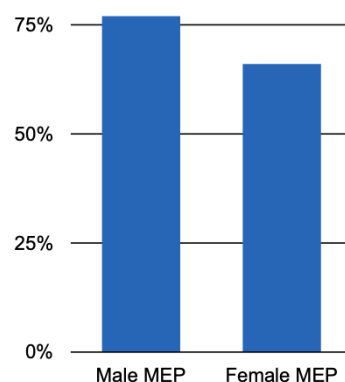


Figure 4 Online Hate received by Male and Female MEPs (Steinert et al., 2023) ⁴²

⁴¹ Steinert, Janina, Luise Koch, and Jürgen Pfeffer. *Online hate against members of the European parliament*. (2023). p. 4

⁴² *Ibidem*

While elected representatives still constitute the most visible group targeted by TPV, the raising phenomenon extends way far beyond those formal mandates. Among the victims of intimidation, threats and harassment appear also political candidates, staff members and even the relatives of political actors. As soonish will be evaluated, this broader set of targets reflects the relational and networked nature of political life, highlighting that violence is also often directed towards individuals who are associated with that authority in some way.

Political Candidates represent a particularly vulnerable group in politics, violence against candidates is designed to deter their political participation, to influence the outcomes of their work or even to prevent certain ideas to enter the political arena. Those political actors become a significant target of violence especially during election campaigns, ‘environments’ explained by EPRS⁴³, as where violence and harassment against candidates escalate. As a result, they experience forms of hostility similar to those faced by already elected legislators, but facing it in a more precarious position. Similarly, even if not holding nor running for any office, the Political Staff is also directly affected. The politician’s team is made of loads of people, parliamentary assistants, advisers, communication officers and constituency workers, whose proximity and involvement to political power make them designed targets, both as individuals working close to politicians as well as victims of abuse perpetrated by the latters. Those behaviours occurs within political institutions, where forms of interpersonal abuse are not uncommon, perpetrated by politicians themselves.

A survey by Unite, reported by Lizzy Buchan in the English newspaper *Independent*, about the ‘toxic relationship’ between some MEPs and their junior members of staff exposes:

<< a fifth of Westminster (Parliament) staff reporting that they have been bullied, revealing a ‘toxic’ relationship between some MPs and staff. >>⁴⁴

These are just few evidence of senior politicians leveraging their authorities, status, gender, ethnicity and control over career opportunities to silence junior staff members, creating conditions where dissent is discouraged and harassment can persist unchecked within the structures of political power.

⁴³ Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence and intimidation against politicians in the EU*. European Parliamentary Research Service, October

⁴⁴<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/westminster-staff-bullying-parliament-fifth-harassment-mps-offices-a8072061.html> Lizzy Buchan, November, 2017.

Subsequently, also relatives and families of politicians can become targets of political violence, becoming a kind of “surrogate targets”. A specific tactic used by perpetrators to inflict psychological distress, increasing the personal cost of political engagement for the actor in charge, and coerce them to leave the office. This specific VAP extend beyond the individuals to affect their personal environment, including immediate family members, homes and personal property, the harm, then, is directed to secondary assets; to intimidate and destabilise the primary actor, exerting indirect pressure. Beyond people, the home can become a symbolic vulnerability, just like personal belonging ⁴⁵. This expansion of the target broadly over the individual politician demonstrates that TPV is not confined into institutional settings, but clearly it can filtrate through intimate domains.

Although these two points, the perpetrators and the target, have been useful to better understand the actors involved in violence against politicians; before moving to the third point of key components and trying to analyse the strategic purposes of VAP, it is useful to step back to the broader conceptual foundations of the term “Violence”.

Box 1, Newspapers Reporting Violence against Politicians ⁴⁶

- **Labour MP Jo Cox dies after being shot and stabbed.** (Booth, R., Dodd, V., Parveen, N., 16 Jun 2016)
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/16/labour-mp-jo-cox-shot-in-west-yorkshire>
- **German politician Lübke shot in head at close range.** (3 June 2019)
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48496972>
- **Murdered Polish mayor's funeral draws crowd of 45,000 in Gdansk.** (Goraj, P., 19 January 2019)
<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/murdered-polish-mayors-funeral-draws-crowd-of-45000-in-gdansk-idUSKCN1PD0EL/>
- **Political violence spreads fear in the United States.** (Santaelalia, I., 23 June 2025)
<https://english.elpais.com/usa/2025-06-23/political-violence-spreads-fear-in-the-united-states.html>

These headlines illustrate the range of violence directed at political actors, from lethal attacks to persistent threats and intimidation.

These are just examples of the visibility and pervasiveness of violence within contemporary political life. While these cases differ in form and context, each points to a common phenomenon: violence in politics is not exceptional, rather it is increasingly embedded in contemporary democratic life. But to understand what actually is violence occurring in the

⁴⁵ European Conference of Presidents of Parliament. *Violence Against Politicians*. Background Document. Council of Europe, 2025

⁴⁶ Illustrative media sources include: The Guardian (2016) on the murder of Jo Cox; BBC News (2019) on the assassination of Walter Lübke; Reuters (2019) on the killing of Paweł Adamowicz; El País (2025) on attacks against state legislators in the United States.

political sphere, and how it operates, it is first necessary to clarify the broader concept of violence.

The World Health Organization's definition ⁴⁷ of the concept, highlights that violence encompasses not only physical harm, but also the use of force, including psychological, emotional or coercive forms and that these behaviours are supposed to cause injury, fear or deprivation. This clarity is essential in the political context, as much of the violence directed to politicians is more likely to be described as non-physical intimidation, harassment or coercive pressure, in order to influence decision-making or to restrict participation.

Similarly, recalling Hamby's concepts ⁴⁸ which, as well, have been mentioned in the first paragraph, political violence can be understood as *non-essential* and *unwanted* behaviour, which has no democratic function. Instead, it aims to harm, silence or constrain the target, consequences that are not considered into the democratic necessarily actions such as criticism, disagreement and debate, which serve and maintain Democracy alive. In this sense, violence serves those purposes that are fully incompatible with democratic norms.

3. The Nature of Objectives

Revisiting these fundamental definitions clarify why the objectives of TPV cannot be, most of the times, understood as incidents. Instead, these multifaced acts should be interpreted through their strategic dimensions, seeking to intimidate, exclude, delegitimise and punish political actors, undermining their right to participate freely and safely into the political arena and maintaining social and gender hierarchies. These aims can be grouped into several key categories:

i. Political, Electoral and Governance Purpose

A central purpose of VAP concerns the pursuit of political, electoral and governance-related goals. Such violence is far from being random acts of aggression, rather than, is often deployed to influence political processes, to weak institutions as well as to alter or maintain power, directly interfering with Democracy. One of the key objectives is the achievement of specific political outcomes, in line with the already mentioned EPRS' briefing in November 2025, in which Political Violence is understood << *as the deliberate use of force or*

⁴⁷ Krug, E.G., Mercy, J.A., Dahlberg, L.L. and Zwi, A.B., (2002). *The world report on violence and health. The lancet*, 360(9339), pp.1084.

⁴⁸ Hamby, Sherry. (2017) *On defining violence, and why it matters. Psychology of Violence*, Vol 7(2).

intimidation by state or non-state actors to achieve political objectives >> ⁴⁹ and where perpetrators are described as employing intimidation, coercion or even physical force to change political actors' behaviour. In doing so, these acts seek to violate rights of many actors in the political arena, such as political candidates, office holders, but also voters, whose ability to freely participate in fair elections is being undermined. However, another objective is the attempt to influence policy and electoral outcomes, violence before or during elections may seek to tilt the electoral field by discouraging campaigning, silencing certain candidates or intimidating voters, while violence perpetrated after elections may aim to punish politicians for specific decisions or to deter them from setting a certain agenda. ⁵⁰ In both cases, the purpose is to manipulate decision-making by imposing costs on political participation. Overall, political, electoral and governance objectives highlight the strategic nature of VAP, as it is used not merely to inflict harm, but to shape political behaviour, to influence outcomes and challenge the authority structures.

ii. Reinforcing Social and Gendered Hierarchies

A further set of objectives beyond violence against politicians concerns the preservation and the reinforcement of already existing social, gendered and power hierarchies. Especially in the case of violence against female and ethnic minority politicians, aggression is not only a reaction to political positions or public visibility, but also a mechanism aimed to maintain structural inequalities and reinforce existing power structures. VAWIP, as well introduced by Krook and Restrepo Sanin ⁵¹, is fundamentally rooted in the longstanding gendered norms and stereotypes, enforced with the expectations about the “appropriate” roles of women, defending the patriarchal structures that regulate the access to power. In that way, by framing women's political participation as illegitimate, perpetrators use violence to push them back to “their place”, that politics is not thought to be.

Nonetheless, as highlighted by Ionel Zamfir in the November 2025 EPRS briefing ⁵², this form of violence has also a broader deterrent. Its goal is to discourage women, as a group, from entering or remaining into the political realm, creating a climate in which female

⁴⁹ Zamfir, I., (2025). *Violence against Women Active in Politics in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February. p. 2 .

⁵⁰ Krook, M., L., & Restrepo Sanin, J. (2020) *The cost of doing politics? Analyzing violence and harassment against female politicians*. Perspectives on Politics 18(3) p.742.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*

⁵² Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence against Women Active in Politics in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February. p. 2 .

politicians feel pressure to self-censor, avoid issues or withdraw from the public arena. Such outcomes do not just affect the specific target, but also carry many other implications, such as diminishing the descriptive and substantive representation and undermining the legitimacy and inclusiveness of democratic institutions. As well, violence against minority groups, including ethnic, religious or LGBTQIA+ politicians operates along similar logics; by reinforcing social hierarchies, the presence of those actors is challenged, preserving the existing power structures by restricting who is allowed to participate in the political sphere.

iii. Psychological and Democratic Consequences

Beyond immediate physical harm, VAP generates deep psychological and democratic consequences, that extend far beyond the individual target. In particular, the “psychological harm” mentioned by the World Health Organization in defining violence, raise a sense of vulnerability among politicians, discouraging the full participation in public life. In that moment the fear becomes the strategy; pushing individuals to self-censor, withdraw them from online and public spaces or even avoiding politically sensitive issues. All these psychological effects translate into broader democratic consequences. Violence, intimidation and coercion undermine the credibility and the reputation of political actors through many channels: personalised attacks, smear campaigns, reputational damage and so on. As a result, the public trust is eroded in both, individual officeholders and political institutions more broadly. When a politician reduces his visibility, refrain from debate or leave the office due to scarcely security, the quality of representation declines, and democracy get weak.⁵³

In this way, VAP operates as a coercive tool that restrict who can safely participate in politics and diminishes the inclusiveness and legitimacy of the democratic process.

Taken together, perpetrators, target and the strategic objectives of violence, illustrate that TPV is not a random or episodic phenomenon, rather, a systemic and purposeful tool of contemporary political life. The actors who engage in violence range from ordinary citizens to organised groups, criminal networks but also rival political elites, each one mobilizing different sources and motivations. As we clearly see, the individual targets are not chosen randomly as well, they occupy national or international political roles, which carry symbolic, institutional and strategic meaning. The violence directed to them echoes beyond their

⁵³ European Conference of Presidents of Parliament. *Violence Against Politicians*. Background Document. Council of Europe, 2025 p. 2

personal experience, it affects political organisations, parties, but even families and private lives, physically and psychologically. Understanding those fundamental components provides us the conceptual foundation for analysing how political violence evolves across time and space, as the next section will demonstrate, forms and modalities of violence have shifted considerably through time. While physical attacks still persist, contemporary political violence increasingly manifest through symbolic aggression, reputational harm and digital harassment, amplified by technological change and transformations in political communication.

Tracing this evolution is essential to contextualise the phenomenon within technological developments and to understand if still, and why, certain groups, such as women and ethnic minorities politicians face disproportionately forms of violence.

1.3 From Physical to Symbolic and Digital Political Violence

Political violence is not a static phenomenon. While its objectives are remarkably the same over time, the forms through which violence is exercised have evolved in response to broader political, institutional and technological transformations.

Historically, political violence has been predominantly associated with physical force: assassinations, repression, armed clashes and acts of terrorism aimed to eliminate or directly intimidate political opponents. Such forms of violence were targeting the body as the primary site of harm and visibility, reinforcing power through the use of force and the threat of physical injury or death.⁵⁴ From a classical perspective, this understanding of political violence is closely linked to the role of the modern state in regulating coercion. As famously argued by Max Weber, the modern state is defined by its claim to the monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. In already consolidated democratic systems, this monopoly has progressively limited the open use of physical force as a legitimate means of political contestation. Acts of this type, carried out by non-state actors are more clearly identified as illegal illegitimate and sanctionable. However, the consolidation of the state's monopoly over coercive force has not eliminated political violence as a strategy of power. Rather than eliminating political violence altogether, it has contributed to a transformation in its modalities, as direct physical force has become

⁵⁴ Bardall, G. (2020). *Symbolic violence as a form of violence against women in politics: A critical examination*. *Revista mexicana de ciencias políticas y sociales*, 65(238), p. 380.

increasingly delegitimised and sanctioned, political violence has adapted to new forms, operating below the threshold of legality.⁵⁵

Focusing just on physical manifestations risks overlooking the ways in which political violence has progressively diversified. Contemporary political conflicts are more and more unfolded through symbolic, communicative and psychological forms of aggression, which do not necessarily involve bodily harm, yet are no less consequential for democratic participation. To Pierre Bourdieu⁵⁶, symbolic violence refers to discursive and representational practices that delegitimise certain actors from being political ones, undermining their authority and restricting their participation, that's why attacks on reputation, credibility and legitimacy have become central tools for constraining political actors and shaping power relations.

However, this transformation does not imply the disappearance of physical violence. The assassinations of political actors like Joe Cox in (England, 2016) , Walter Lübcke in (Germany, 2019) and Paweł Adamowicz (Poland, 2019) demonstrate that attacks against elected representatives continue to occur in contemporary democracies. Then, rather than replacing physical violence, the symbolic and digital forms signal a range widening. In this sense, physical, symbolic and digital forms coexist and interact.

The rise of digital communication technologies has further intensified this transformation. Social media platforms and online spaces have amplified the reach, the speed and the visibility of political hostility, also lowering the cost of participation in violent campaign and blurring the boundaries between public debate and intimidation. As a result, political violence today operates across multiple dimensions, often reinforcing one another and producing cumulative effects on political behavior, participation and representation. Tracing this evolution is essential for understanding how violence functions in contemporary political life and for contextualising its gendered manifestations, which will be addressed in the following chapter.

⁵⁵ Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation* (1919)

⁵⁶ Bourdieu, P., *Masculine Domination* (1998); *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991)

1.3.1 Towards Less Visible Forms of Political Violence

The transformation of political violence does not entail its disappearance, but rather a reconfiguration of how violence is exercised, perceived and justified within contemporary political systems.

A crucial step in understanding this shift, from overt physical force to less visible and more ambiguous forms of violence, lies in expanding the concept of violence by including the exercise of power. As previously presented, the World Health Organization amplifies the definition of violence as including also as the use of power that results in psychological harm, deprivation or impaired participation ⁵⁷. This comprehensive identification allows for the inclusion of forms of harm that do not strictly rely on body injuries, yet deeply affect individuals' capacity to act freely in political life. Within this perspective, violence and harassment are best understood along a continuum, ranging from explicit attacks to more indirect practices of coercion.

Within this expanded framework, political violence ever more operates through symbolic and communicative practices that target meaning, representation and legitimacy, rather than the body itself. Verbal attacks, threats, delegitimizing and defamatory campaigns, false and misleading narratives function as tools through which political actors are often undermined without actually recurring to direct physical harm. These practices strike at reputation, credibility and perceived authority, thereby constraining political participation and shaping power relations in ways that are often difficult to detect or sanction. As theorised by Pierre Bourdieu, such forms of symbolic violence rely on a more complex democratic problem, relying on processes of misrecognition and operating through legitimised norms that let domination feel natural, acceptable and invisible. Building on this perspective, symbolic violence in politics is analytically deconstructed by Bourdieu ⁵⁸ into “Acts of Commission” and “Acts of Omission”. The former, referring to practices through which political actors are directly targeted through discourses, including incitement to hostility and physical harm and all those treatments that cross the boundary of legitimate criticism towards violence: verbal harassment, sexualised representations and acts of silencing individuals from public life. On the other hand, Omission, operating through the absence of actions. These acts include practices of invisibilisation, not recognising certain actors as legitimate into political realm as

⁵⁷ Krug, E.G., Mercy, J.A., Dahlberg, L.L. and Zwi, A.B., 2002. *The world report on violence and health. The lancet*, 360(9339), pp.1084

⁵⁸ Bourdieu, P., (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*, Harvard University Press.

well as the systematic questioning about their authority or competence, and the appropriation of their ideas without any attribution. Even if less open, is such omission that contribute to sustain unequal power relations, by denying recognition and voice to certain actors.⁵⁹

This understanding, developed by Bourdieu, conceptualise symbolic violence as the imposition of values and perspectives of the dominant social group into subordinated ones, operated by misrecognition. It's clear that symbolic violence relies on the perception of legitimacy, but also is based on a form of "Unconscious Complicity"⁶⁰ whereby relations of domination are internalised and reproduced as natural and inevitable. That's why, unlike physical violence, symbolic violence often exists because it is not recognised as violence itself, rather, as an expression of accepted social order; and applied to the political sphere, this framework helps explain how violence can be exercised without clear coercion, through norms, representation and participation practices.

Importantly, the growing prominence of less visible and more ambiguous forms of violence does not imply the disappearing of physical violence: high profile assassinations and attacks against elected representatives show that direct physical harm still remains a persistent feature of contemporary political life, therefore, violence is no longer necessarily expressed through physical injury alone.

However, while the forms discussed above differ in their mechanism, they share a common effect: by targeting legitimacy, visibility and recognition, those reshape the conditions of political participation, by creating fear, uncertainty and psychological pressure, while producing invisibilizing, silencing and exiting effects, undermining democratic participation by constraining whose voice can be heard.

⁵⁹ Bardall, G. (2020). *Symbolic violence as a form of violence against women in politics: A critical examination*. *Revista mexicana de ciencias políticas y sociales*, 65(238), p. 381-384.

⁶⁰ Ivi p.382

1.3.2 Digitalisation of Political Violence

The digitalisation of political communication has profoundly reshaped forms, scale and dynamics of political violence, without actually constituting its primary cause. Among scholars like Zizi Papacharissi ⁶¹, Whitney Phillips ⁶², Alice Marwick ⁶³ is popular the idea about digital platforms requiring not be understood as generating political violence themselves, but rather as environments that amplify, accelerate and transform already existing practices of hostility and coercion. In this sense, the online sphere acts as a multiplier of political violence by altering its visibility and persistence, while leaving its objectives unchanged, such as intimidation, exclusion and control over political participation.

A defining feature of digital political violence lies in the extreme reduction of costs associated with engaging in violent practices, clearly combined with a significant expansion of their potential impact. Material, social and psychological barriers lower in online context, in favour to harassment, threats and delegitimizing campaigns, allowing individuals to engage with others in aggressive behaviour, with minimal effort and limited risk of sanctions. At the same time, digital platforms rapidly increase speed, scale and reach of those practices, enabling the spread of violent messages, then replicated across networks and reproduced across time. As noted in the wide literature on online harassment and visibility, low-cost actions can therefore generate disproportionately wide and long lasting effects. ⁶⁴

The transformation of political violence in digital environments is further shaped by the ever growing disintermediation of political communication, a process through which traditional gatekeepers, such as journalists, editors and party organisations are disregarded, enabling direct communication between political actors and the public. As highlighted by Daniel Kreiss, this shift weakens editorial controls while facilitating rapid circulation of antagonistic content, intensifying both the visibility and the diffusion of hostile political discourse. ⁶⁵ Nevertheless, while this intermediation has been associated with new opportunities for participation in Democracies, it's clear that it also facilitated the rapid diffusion of hostile narratives, misinformation and targeted attacks.

⁶¹ Papacharissi, Z. (2016). *Affective publics and structures of storytelling: sentiment, events and mediality*. Information, Communication & Society, 19(3), 307–324

⁶² Phillips, W., & Milner, R. M. (2018). *The ambivalent internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online*. John Wiley & Sons.

⁶³ Marwick, A. (2021). *Morally Motivates Networked Harassment*. Yale University Press.

⁶⁴ Marwick, A. (2021). *Morally Motivates Networked Harassment*. Yale University Press.

⁶⁵ Kreiss, D. (2016) *Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

As highlighted once again by Zizi Papacharissi in *Affective Publics* (2015), digital political communication is often driven by emotional intensity, while digital environments are engagement-driven platforms, which means that they tend to privilege emotionally charged and polarizing content, increasing the visibility of antagonistic discourses.

Online hostility often manifests in waves, driven by specific political events like electoral campaigns or debates, producing dense episodes of abuse affecting highly visible political actors. It's visibility itself, as widely showed by Marwick in *Morally Motivates Networked Harassment* (2021), the key factor for risk. The probability to attract hostile attacks is proportionate to the visibility of an individual, and these dynamics contribute as well to the normalisation of aggressive discourse, blurring the boundaries between legitimate political disagreement (agonism) and coercive harm (antagonism).

A further defining characteristic of digital political violence concerns its ambiguity and its deniability, which intensify the patterns already discussed. Online aggression is usually framed within humour, irony and legitimate political opinion, enabling perpetrators to deny harmful intent and shift their responsibility into the target. As emphasized by Phillips and Milner, the meaning and the impact of online hostility do not rely just on the specific individual message, but also on its circulation and interpretation in the digital context. Nowadays, the use of memes and coded language spread by anonymous accounts further complicates the attribution of accountability, allowing for violent practices to remain not-condemned while producing tangible effects on political behavior and participation.⁶⁶

Importantly, what emerges from these research mentioned above, is that digital political violence does not operate in isolation from offline forms of harm, offline and online dimensions are deeply intertwined. To clarify, digital hostility often produces visible effects and consequences, while offline harms are simultaneously amplified through online circulation. Research on online harassment and political communication shows that threats, intimidation and hostility, circulating through digital platforms, can shape offline perception of safety and vulnerability. Exposure to online abuse can translate to security concerns, changes in behavior or withdrawal from political activities, demonstrating how violence enacted online spills over in offline political life (Marwick, 2021). At the same time, offline political attacks are rapidly disseminated through digital platforms, where they acquire wide visibility. Through these processes of online circulation, possibility to comment and to reinterpretate,

⁶⁶ Phillips, W., Milner, R. (2017) *The Ambivalent Internet*. Polity.

here, isolated events are amplified, extended and embedded with antagonistic narratives, which purpose is to intensify the political and social impact. (Phillips & Milner, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015).

Even more crucial, the harm generated by digital political violence, often emerge from sustained exposure to low-intensity hostility, where the accumulation of insults and threats go creating politics as a negative environment where persistent intimidation erode trust, participation will and create silencing effects. This *chilling effect*, term coined by William J. Brennan Jr.⁶⁷; constrains political participation, by shaping who is able to speak, about what, and who remain visible; thereby affecting inclusiveness and representativeness of democratic institutions.

Understanding the role of digitalisation in reshaping political violence is essential for analysing contemporary democracies and their dynamics, as the following chapter will demonstrate, these transformations gain high relevance when examined through a gendered point of view.

1.3.3 Empirical Evidence of Political Violence

While the transformation of political violence has been primarily discussed at an abstract level, a still growing body of empirical research are essential to confirm that these dynamics are not just theoretical. Surveys, reports and studies increasingly provide evidence of the prevalence, various forms and the consequences of political violence within democratic systems.

Empirical evidence indicates that threats and intimidation have become widespread feature of contemporary political life, often even not recognised as being harmful due to their normalisation. Despite the Inter-Parliamentary Union's research in 2016⁶⁸ is specifically referring to gender-based violence in parliamentary contexts, this report is therefore helpful to deeply investigate how much and how violence is embedded into our democracies. Nevertheless, IPU's global study gathers data from personal experiences of 55 women volunteers parliamentarians across 39 countries in Africa, Europe, Asia-Pacific, the Americas

⁶⁷ The notion "chilling effect" originates in U.S. constitutional justice (Brennan 1965), then widely adopted in studies of political participation and online harassment to describe indirect deterrence mechanisms (Papacharissi, 2016; Marwick, 2021)

⁶⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians*.

and Arab countries; founding that a significant majority of women parliamentarians experience some kind of violence. By agreeing that: << *sexism and violence were universal and systemic problems in the world of parliaments.* >> ⁶⁹

Quite similar, the 2018 IPU/PACE's study moved the focus toward the European context, explicitly conducted to investigate whether the 2016 trends could be applied there. Once again, the findings confirmed that violence against politicians, in this case specifically against female political actors, is present.

<< *The study shows that acts of sexism, abuse and violence against women are indeed to be found in parliaments in Europe. The extent and nature of these acts, which are violations of fundamental rights, need to be addressed by parliaments and require action to be taken.* >> ⁷⁰

Despite the gender perspective is the key for the development of this thesis, these research will return to our attention in the following chapter, by specifically addressing to VAWIP. Rather, it's better investigate the presence of hostile behavior against political actors within European borders, as largely discussed by the EPRS' *Violence and Intimidation against Politicians in the EU* in 2025. The briefing highlights the rise of violence against political actors due to the evolving polarisation of the political sphere, especially describing 2024 European elections when << *there were serious incidents in several countries* >> ⁷¹

By describing the tense political landscape across Europe, the survey indicates that online and offline abuses, threats and intimidation are today parts of everyday life for politicians, reporting impact of violence in many countries shows that: 81% of local politicians in Germany have been attacked, experiencing both physical and psychological harm, while 83% have been intimately targeted by disinformation campaigns and deep fakes. Moreover, reported a Swedish survey among elected representatives where, around 28% respondents are worried about them or their close to be victims of violence ⁷² while, in Ireland, 89% of respondents in a survey declared feelings of anxiety after abuses, between them, a 49% felt

⁶⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*. p.3

⁷⁰ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*. p.1

⁷¹ Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence and Intimidation against Politicians in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February. p.1

⁷² <https://bra.se/english/publications/archive/2023-11-16-the-politicians-safety-survey-2023>

the need to increase the security in their homes and 45% behave by self-censoring certain opinions.⁷³

However, research about violence in politics, detected within EU member states, is ever increasing. Importantly, these patterns are not confined neither to past electoral dynamics nor in just local and national ones, evidence from recent elections are given by EPRS, confirming the persistence of harassment and violence, both online and offline. The *Report on the 2024 Elections to the European Parliament*, published in June 2025 by the General Directorate for Justice and Consumers, mention a wave of violence against people involved in the campaigns in Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, Germany and Slovenia; to which the EP expressed profound concern, stricking to prioritize prevention over cure.

⁷³ Zamfir, I., (2025). *Violence and Intimidation against Politicians in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February. p. 4

1.4 Political Violence and Democratic Dynamics

Political Violence is not only just a matter of security and public order, rather, it affects the normative foundations of democratic systems. Referring to these letters, we are mentioning all those principles and values that justify the promotion of democracy as a political paradigm.

Democratic systems rely on a set of normative foundations, including political equality, effective participation, pluralism and solid representative institutions.⁷⁴ These principles require political competition developing freely from intimidation and coercion, in a space where actors can engage in contestation without any fear, and where dissimilar voices can participate on equal terms.

The Council of Europe depicts *12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance* as the first, ruling democratic participation, representation and the fair conducting of elections. Saying further:

<< [...] Participation is inclusive, ensuring balanced representation of all genders and fostering the involvement of vulnerable and less privileged groups [...] Public life is built on the freedoms of expression, assembly and association[...]. >> ⁷⁵

Then:

<< [...] fairness, dignity, equality and respect are upheld in accordance with European and International standards [...]. Legislation, institutions and practices ensure promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights. Equality and inclusion are actively fostered, combating discrimination and hate while respecting diversity in all forms. >> ⁷⁶

⁷⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/centre-of-expertise-for-multilevel-governance/12-principles>

⁷⁵

[https://www.coe.int/en/web/centre-of-expertise-for-multilevel-governance/12-principles#{%2225565951%22:\[011}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/centre-of-expertise-for-multilevel-governance/12-principles#{%2225565951%22:[011})

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[https://www.coe.int/en/web/centre-of-expertise-for-multilevel-governance/12-principles#{%2225565951%22:\[111}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/centre-of-expertise-for-multilevel-governance/12-principles#{%2225565951%22:[111})

To sum, these are the basis for healthy and strong democracies: equal access, freedom to think and express, political equality and rejection of coercion. However, these conditions should not automatically be taken for granted.

Violence, as deeply discussed before, has entered politics through many forms and inevitably led to an alteration of democracy as it was supposed to be. Physical, verbal, symbolic, or psychological violence play a deviation in democratic assets, by progressively eroding those established principles. Equal dignity, inclusion and freedom, skeletal substance of democracy are nowadays altered and eroded by threats, intimidation and assaults. Once unthinkable forms of political violence relocate, becoming a background condition of democratic environment, where pressure, menace and bully become routine, leading to a change in citizens and elite's perspective, who directly start legitimating and accepting these tactics.

More than representing a disruption of democratic principles, violence embodying a structural negation of them. Clear evidence is given by the crisis of democratic's recognition of political opponents as legitimate adversaries, within a shared normative framework as a pillar. Nonetheless, as Ignatieff argues in *The Politics of Enemies*⁷⁷, contemporary democracies increasingly shift by viewing political actors as enemies, rather than adversaries. This is where the opponent is seen as a breathing threat, instead of a competing voice, where the space for dialogue and compromise tightens. In this regard, Chantal Mouffe's distinction between *agonism* and *antagonism*⁷⁸ is extremely light. While *agonism* describes a form of democratic contestation, where political adversaries disagree within a shared democratic framework, *antagonism* relate to an hostile conflict between enemies who do not recognise each other's legitimacy, nullifying the other, even by using violence as a strategy.

The normalisation of antagonistic politics and the diffusion of hostility within the public sphere also produce subtle effects on democratic life. One of these is the previously mentioned *chilling effect*. A political discourse saturate with aggressions and intimidation may refrain individuals from expressing their thoughts or engaging in public debate, this self-censorship do not require direct repression, however, while the formal right to express freely remains, yet the substantive exercise feels confined. Closely connected to these dynamics, a new challenge is raising, due to unsafe public arena: participation becomes uneven. Violence, whether implicit or not, has the power to reshape the democratic field by

⁷⁷ Ignatieff, M. (2022). *The Politics of Enemies*. Journal of Democracy, 33(4), 5-19.

⁷⁸ Mouffe, C. (1999). *Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism?*. In Models of Deliberative Democracy (pp. 251-264). Routledge.

selectively silencing some voices while amplifying others, those latter, with greater social and economic resources remain active, while more vulnerable ones withdraw. This dynamic transforms political participation from being a free and equal competition ⁷⁹ into a selective process due to some actors' retreat and others' self-censorship. The arena remains technically open, even if substantively distorted, because coercion does not necessarily eliminate participation, rather, it reshapes it.

As a result, violence is not just altering *who* participates, but also under which condition they do. The democratic arena turns to be uneven and shaped by fear, rather than being a place where equal access and open contestation are celebrated.

However, in order to fully understand these dynamics, we must consider the institutional environment in which political actors operate. Political institutions are not neutral arenas, rather, these are spaces made by power relations, organisational cultures and informal rules, which may enable or even normalise certain forms of hostility. It becomes essential today to examine the institutional context in which political violence unfold, in order to better understand how these dynamics persist and shape the democratic participation.

⁷⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union (1994). *Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections*.

1.5 Institutional Contexts and the Normalisation of Political Violence

These dynamics show that political violence is able to reshape democratic participation by altering who is able to participate and who is not. Violence unfolds within institutional environments that may tolerate hostile behaviors, this is why it is essential today to understand the role of institutions and to explain how political violence persists and affects democracy.

Political violence develops within specific political and institutional contexts that influence the behavior and interactions of political actors. According to institutionalist approaches in political science, institutions are not neutral arenas in which political competition can simply unfold. As March and Olsen ⁸⁰ explain, political institutions are autonomous structures with formal rules, informal norms, organisational practices and routines that shape political behavior and identities. Institutions can influence what political actors are able to do, as well as what kinds of behavior are considered appropriate within a given political context.

As a key aspect of their theory, the *Logic of Appropriateness* (March & Olsen 1989) is described as driving political behaviors. Those are guided by what is seen as rightful, natural or expected in a certain context, political actors must follow rules and norms rather than acting just according to strategy and self-interest.

As a result, institutions play a pivotal role in structuring the boundaries of acceptable political conduct. Yet the problem is, when aggressive practices are tolerated or not enough sanctioned, they may become embedded in everyday political interactions and soonish normalised within political life. How can this happen? Political competition is clearly characterised by disputes, conflicts and intense public scrutiny, it is part of the democratic environment. Despite this, there are often inappropriate behaviors that can be reframed as part of the “roughness” of political life. When hostile speeches, intimidation and delegitimising practices are repeatedly tolerated, they risk to become embedded in everyday standard. Here, in these circumstances, those acts of aggression may no longer be seen as exceptional, rather, as routine practices of political life. This process of normalisation can blur boundaries between *agonism*’s contestation and abusive behavior, making it deeply hard to be recognised by both institutions and political actors themselves.

⁸⁰ March, James G., and Johan P. Olsen. *The new institutionalism: Organizational factors in political life*. *American political science review* 78.3 (1983): 734-749.

Moreover, institutional responses here play a crucial role in determining whether these hostile dynamics are challenged or sustained, by adopting codes of conduct and reporting procedures, in order to prevent and sanction abusive behaviors. However, weaknesses and scarcity of their implementation lead to the failure of existing practices while contributing to negative behavior persistence. As deeply studied by Mona Lena Krook; a researcher whose work upon VAWIP will guide the line of this thesis in later chapters; in such contexts victims may hesitate to report incidents due to concerns about reputational consequences and lack of trust in institutional protection mechanisms. Which means that widespread violence is allowed by insufficient legislation, or better, as she argues:

<< Legislation on this issue is not sufficient if there is a culture of impunity and non-implementation.>> ⁸¹

And again, in conclusion to the Issues Brief of the IPU study in 2016 they claim:

<< Such behaviour must no longer be viewed as just the price to be paid for political involvement. It is the duty of political actors [...] and of parliaments as institutions to set the right examples. They need to put some order in their own houses if they do not wish to help legitimize discrimination and violence [...] >> ⁸²

As a result, some forms of political violence may remain underreported and still operate within institutional settings; however, these dynamics become extremely important when examining gendered forms of political violence. Here, structural inequalities and institutional cultures may interact to shape women's political participation and substantial representation ⁸³.

This chapter gave the theoretical foundations for understanding Political Violence as a multidimensional phenomenon. After a conceptual definition of violence as a broader concept, with its forms and manifestations, this chapter traces the evolution of political violence from physical to digital forms, identifying its key components: Perpetrators, Victims

⁸¹ Krook, M. L. (2017). *Violence against women in politics*. Journal of democracy, 28(1), p.462

⁸² Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians*. p.11

⁸³ Berthet, V., (2022). *Mobilization Against Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament: The MeTooEP campaign*. European Journal of Women's Studies. 29(2).

and Objectives. Then, this chapter examined how digitalisation has changed political violence's landscape, demonstrating how these widespread dynamics are also affecting different political contexts by having consequences on political representation and democratic quality. Notably, the chapter also captured the institutional contexts of the phenomenon, showing how internal cultures, power hierarchies and reporting mechanisms determine how wrong behavior can be recognised and normalised. These dynamics demonstrate that political violence, as deeply investigated in this first chapter, can't be understood just as a series of individual acts. Rather, VAP must be analysed within the institutional context that shapes political behavior and political interaction. Institutional cultures, power hierarchies and the availability of reporting mechanisms, all influence whether hostile practices are recognised, rejected or normalised. These dynamics become extremely important when examining gendered forms of political violence, where structural inequalities converge in environments able to shape women's participation. The following chapter will regard at the specific phenomenon of violence against women in politics, examining how these dynamics manifest within contemporary institutions, above all, within the European Parliament.

2. Violence Against Women in Politics: Theoretical Framework and the European Parliament as a Case Study

The first chapter deeply explored the concept of Political Violence in its broader sense, from the foundational definition provided by the World Health Organization to the identification of more specific dynamics. Thanks to scholars like Hoel et al. (2018) and Bjørge et al. (2022) this thesis has been able to deeply define how political violence occurs, who are targets and perpetrators of this specific kind of violence and which are the common implications. Moreover, significant concern is raised by the investigation of online environment: a place where VAP today takes place behind the easily achievable unknown mode, where people are allowed to hide while behaving in a hostile way.

However, as a growing body of scholars ^{84 85} outline, political violence does not affect all actors equally. Gender matters, and existing research has just begun to fully understand it. Chapter two moves precisely from this premise, exploring how gender-based violence in politics operates as a systematic phenomenon that disproportionately and differently affects women in comparison to men. The aim of the chapter is to understand those specific forms, motives and consequences that depict violence as gender driven, differing from political violence more broadly. To do this, the chapter unfolds the concept of VAWIP: what it looks like, why it happens and which are the reasons behind it. In doing so, this thesis takes the European Parliament as its primary case study, questioning whether the EP is the most gender- equal institution of the EU as it is assumed to be, or whether hostile behaviour against women politicians still remain unchallenged. It also asks why this gap exists and what does it tell us about the limits of formal measures.

⁸⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*.

⁸⁵ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Violence against women in politics. A defense of the concept*. *Política y gobierno*, 23(2).

2.1 Why Gender Matters in Political Violence

Even though *Gender* is a key word in investigating about VAWIP, is not that common to know the complexity behind that term. What is Gender? Why is it that controversial? Which are the differences between Gender and Sex?

From a theoretical standpoint, Judith Butler's *gender performativity* ⁸⁶ would claim that gender is not fixed. Along with many other scholars, she argues that gender has nothing to do with biology, rather, it is a repetition of acts resulting in a performance of doing, which is constructed and enforced. While gender refers to socially established behaviors and external attributes that a given society define suitable for women and men, the term *Sex* refers to the biological components that usually distinct female and male.

At the institutional level, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) 's Glossary and Thesaurus, gender is:

*<< Social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male and to the relationships between women and men [...] These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learnt through socialisation processes. They are context- and time-specific, and changeable. Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context. In most societies, there are differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, and decision-making opportunities. Gender is part of the broader sociocultural context. [...] >>*⁸⁷

To better explain; Butler's *performativity* stands in the creation of gender through everyday actions, whose repetition let people think that gender is fixed, while is not. On the other hand, the more operative and institutional perspective given by EIGE rely in existing differences between men and women, given by society, which provides different roles, opportunities and power access to people, depending on their gender. Even if different, both perspectives agree on one thing: gender is not neutral. Rather, gender shapes who holds the power, who can be excluded and why.. this is why it matters.

⁸⁶ Butler, J. (2002). *Gender trouble*. Routledge

⁸⁷ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/terms-and-definitions>

What EIGE claims by saying that << *Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context.* >>⁸⁸ provides a particularly relevant concept for the purpose of this research. Gender deeply impacts the political arena, simply because its institutions, practices and culture have historically been predominantly male dominated. As many scholars have observed, the private sphere of family has always been that of women, while the social sphere of politics and economy has always been associated with masculinity.

Carmen Alanis ⁸⁹ traces the roots of this kind of discrimination back to what a Mexican feminist anthropologist, Marcela Lagarde ⁹⁰, called *androcentrism*. This latter, is found in thinking about man as superior and more useful than women, considering male domination as natural and adequate. It is because of this historical foundation that, today, the political sphere still conserve and produce a set of gendered norms around the figure of the “ideal politician”, looking at women as *space invaders* (Puwar, 2004) of a male domain. This latter term has been largely used by sociologists in a way to describe women entering the political arena, a realm that has been built upon women’s exclusion, to conserve the needed standards (Puwar, 2004). However, this gendered order is not just a passive thought, instead, it is actively maintained through everyday expectations. Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo’s work confirm that << *the existing gendered order - where hegemonic men hold the vast majority of offices - is seen as natural, just, and inviolate* >> ⁹¹ highlighting the often justified violence against not ideal politically suitable actors, far from the idea of hegemonic masculinity, such as: women, LGBTQIA+ individuals and non-hegemonic men, because << *perpetrators may use violence to keep politics as a male domain* >> ⁹².

While the perception of female’s *unsuitability* in politics seems to be less pervasive today, due to the growing number of women running for and holding office, what is harder to eradicate is the notion of the *ideal politician* and the characteristics historically associated with it. Women are not just kept out of politics, rather, they are expected to fit in and to conform to those standards that were historically built around men.

⁸⁸ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/terms-and-definitions>

⁸⁹ Alanis, C., (2020) *Violence against women in politics*. Kofi Annan Foundation.

⁹⁰ Lagarde & de los Ríos, M. (2000). *Claves feministas para la autoestima de las mujeres*. Horas y Horas.

⁹¹ Bardall, G., Bjarnegård, E., & Piscopo, J. M. (2020). *How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts*. Political Studies, 68(4), p. 925

⁹² *Ibidem*

2.1.1 Politics as a Male Domain: the Ideal Politician

<< Despite progress being made, women hold just 25% of the world's 35,127 parliamentary seats and 21% of the world's 3,343 ministerial positions, in some countries, women are not represented at all. Moreover, in 85 of the 153 countries included in the report, there has never been a female head of state, head of government or president in the last 50 years (WEF, 2019) >> ⁹³

As previously argued, the political sphere has historically been built upon women's exclusion, but what raises more concerns is the persistency of those historical norms. Central among these, is the notion of the *ideal politician*: a figure whose characteristics, behavior and ability to rule as a leader have long been coded as masculine. Understanding why this image persist, allow looking into how gender stereotypes and social expectations about leadership intersect.

However, this picture did not emerge in casualty, rather, it reflects those deeply embedded stereotypes that depict who is naturally suitable for power. Eagly and Karau's *role congruity theory* ⁹⁴, developed in 2002, offers a useful lens to understand how political leadership has historically been associated with *agentic* traits. Those qualities that are oriented toward action, control, dominance and power, such as: assertiveness, rationality, authority and toughness; nonetheless, qualities that society is usually associating with men. This suggest that the ideal politician was never though to be gender neutral, instead, it was built male.

This association is so rooted that is also able to shape who is seen as a suitable candidate, even before the electoral process starting, in that way, it feed the recruitment criteria that systematically decide to disadvantage women ^{95 96}. By contrast, women are usually associated with *communal* traits. Which are are highly valued in certain environments and social contexts, but not seen as much compatible with the political sphere and leadership.

⁹³ Alanis, C., (2020) *Violence against women in politics*. Kofi Annan Foundation. p. 19 about Schwab, K., World Economic Forum. *The Global Competitiveness Report* (2019).

⁹⁴ Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). *Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders*. Psychological review, 109(3)

⁹⁵ Bjarnegård, E. (2013). *Gender, informal institutions and political recruitment: Explaining male dominance in parliamentary representation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

⁹⁶ Håkansson, S. (2023). *The gendered representational costs of violence against politicians*. Perspectives on Politics, 22(1).

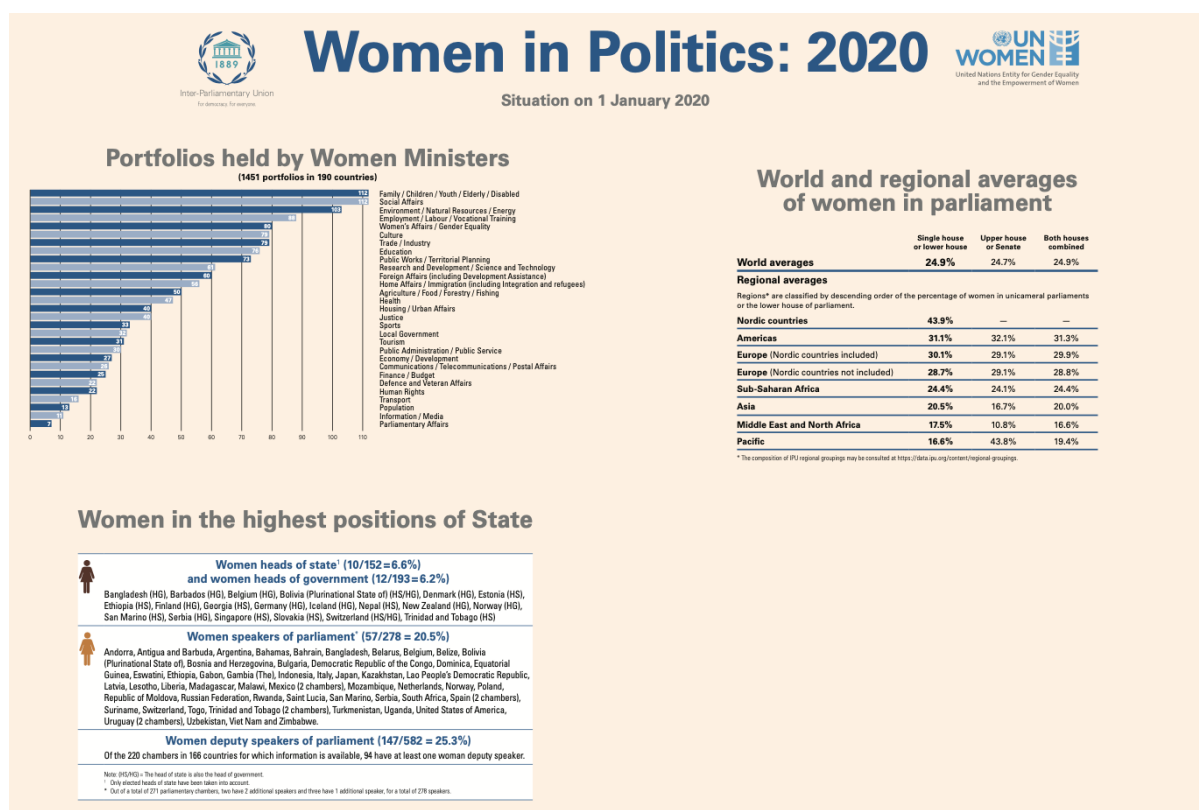


Figure 5 Overview of Women's positions in Politics in 2020 (IPU, UN Women; 2020)

The one described in Figure 5 is the situation on 1 January 2020 about Women in Politics, published by Inter Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, reported by Carmen Alanis ⁹⁷. Data show that in 2020 women remained concentrated in communal roles, then associated with family, culture and sociality, still far from highest positions of power. Communal traits are related to care: women are seen to be more emotional, loyal, compassionate and caring than men, while the ideal politician is requested to be autonomous, competent, superior and decisive. While feminine stereotypes are slowly shifting, men are still widely perceived as more rational and tough, while women continue to be associated with emotionality and weakness ⁹⁸.

This creates what scholars, especially Jamieson ⁹⁹, describe as a *double bind*, a paradox in which women in politics face negative consequences regardless of the choices they make. As such, if a woman adopts an assertive style to appear competent among her colleagues in the political arena, she risks being labelled as aggressive or unlikable, violating the communal

⁹⁷ Alanis, C., (2020) *Violence against women in politics*. Kofi Annan Foundation. p. 24

⁹⁸ Eagly, A. H., Nater, C., Miller, D. I., Kaufmann, M., & Sczesny, S. (2020). *Gender stereotypes have changed: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of US public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018*. *American psychologist*, 75(3).

⁹⁹ Jamieson, K. H. (1995). *Beyond the double bind: Women and leadership*. Oxford University Press.

expectation society has about her. Rather, if she embraces a more empathetic approach, she will probably be perceived as too weak to be there, or too soft for holding political power. Either way, she loses. This tough balancing between acting as competent or behaving as likable is both exhausting and deeply unfair, given that there is no equivalent dynamic for male politicians, who are rarely penalised for displaying the same traits that are rewarded in leadership. However, this bind is not the same for all women. Instead, women belonging to racial or ethnic minorities are even more targeted by those dynamics. In such cases, the double bind is further compounded by racial stereotypes, creating then an even narrower space in which to operate, without facing backlash.

Håkansson¹⁰⁰ define *burden of doubt*, by mentioning Murray¹⁰¹ and Puwar¹⁰². While men are generally assumed to naturally have all those qualities that are required to behave and survive in political life, women face what Murray originally theorized. Unlike males, female politicians who enter the political arena are constantly required to demonstrate their suitability for office, always proving that they belong to that space and deserve to be there, in a place that was not built for them. As Puwar observed in “*Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*” in 2004 ; women entering politics were seen as an exception, as bodies out of their place, whose presence needed to be justified in a way that has never been asked for men.

This bias is not abstract. It shows up in concrete institutional moment, among these, in how politicians are recruited. Norris and Lovenduski’s *legislative recruitment model*¹⁰³ helps explain how.

¹⁰⁰ Håkansson, S. (2023). *The gendered representational costs of violence against politicians*. Perspectives on Politics, 22(1), p.4

¹⁰¹ Murray, R. (2014). *Quotas For Men: Reframing Gender Quotas as a Means of Improving Representation for All*. American Political Science Review, 108(3), 520-532.

¹⁰² Puwar, N. (2004). *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place*. Berg.

¹⁰³ Norris, P., & Lovenduski, J. (1995). *Political recruitment: Gender, race and class in the British Parliament*. Cambridge University Press.

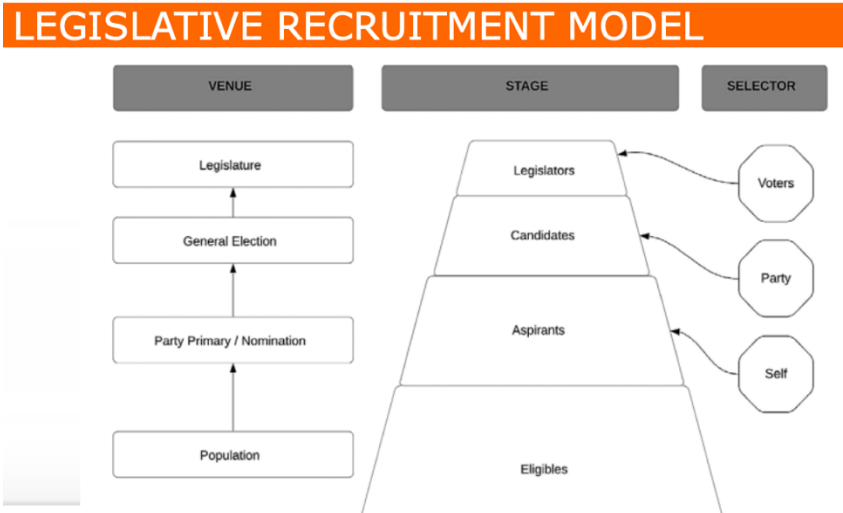


Figure 6 Legislative Recruitment Model. Norris & Lovenduski (1995)

This model gives a very comprehensive overview of different stages, actors and institutions involved in the process of recruitment in politics, and maps the journey from the general population to legislature, driven by three key selectors: the individual themselves (Self), the party (Party) and the voters (Voters). These correspond to the two core dynamics the model is built around, supply and demand. Supply is about who decides to enter politics, driven by resources and ambition. Demand is about what selectors are actually looking for.

It is precisely at the Party demand level that gendered bias operates. Selectors tend to favour candidates who match their idea of the perfect politician, and, as argued above, that image is usually masculine. Women enter the selection process already as disadvantaged actors, not because of explicit rules excluding them but because of invisible standards they are constantly measured against, regardless their competences and experiences.

This dynamic becomes even more present in contexts marked by political violence. As Håkansson highlights, the gendered standard of the ideal politician shift with the context. When recruiters anticipate a future hostile environment, due to public dissatisfaction or crucial foreign-policy, traits such as strength and toughness become even more desirable in a candidate. Inevitably, this further narrows the space available for women, reinforcing once again the link between political suitability and masculinity ¹⁰⁴. The more hostile the political environment is, the more masculine the ideal politician becomes, and consequently, the more

¹⁰⁴ Håkansson, S. (2023). *The gendered representational costs of violence against politicians*. Perspectives on Politics, 22(1), p.84

non suitable women are pushed toward communal committees and soft policies (Håkansson, 2023).

2.1.2 Structural Barriers for Women in Politics

The previous section explored how gendered norms shape the idea of who *should* be in politics or not. The present will dedicate to something more concrete, as the structural conditions that determine who *can* be and on what terms.

Beyond stereotypes, women face everyday barriers that make political participation structurally harder for them. The first of these barriers is what scholars call the *double burden*. Women, across most societies, still carry the primary responsibility for primary domestic and caregiving roles: raising children, taking care of elderly relatives, managing the house... In many cases, it is a personal choice, but it is clear that it is also a structural condition that fight with politics and institutional jobs. Late-night votes, long sitting hours and the requirement of months of physical presence far from home during campaigns, are not designed for people with caregiving responsibilities. Despite this, the physical spaces tell the same story. Many parliamentary buildings were designed without women's bathrooms, without nurseries nor breastfeeding spaces. The British Parliament at Westminster is maybe the most cited example in literature. Sarah Childs describe it as a building whose architecture itself reflects who it was built for, and who was never expected to be seen in ¹⁰⁵. For women, entering politics often means having two full-time commitments at the same time, holding their political role and house duty, a burden that their male colleagues rarely face with the same intensity ¹⁰⁶.

What makes this dynamic particularly significant is that it does not simply create practical obstacles, rather, it also shapes women's choices. When a woman decides whether to invest time and energy into a political career that offers limited opportunities for growth, uncertain conditions and no support for her caregiving responsibilities, sometimes having a step back seems to be a reasonable option. This is not a lack of ambition. It is a response to an unequal

¹⁰⁵ Childs, S. (2016). *The good parliament*. Bristol: University of Bristol.

¹⁰⁶ Lovenduski, J. (2005). *Feminizing politics*. Polity.

system. And this is exactly the mechanism that makes the double burden so blurred. It does not formally exclude women, but the condition it creates do it ¹⁰⁷.

However, as Lovenduski (2005) highlights, this disadvantage does not disappear once women enter the political institution, rather, it follows them inside. Those female politicians who manage to balance caregiving with a political career often do it at the cost of climbing hierarchies. The result is what is commonly described as the *glass ceiling*, an invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching the highest positions of power. Positions that remain predominantly male-dominated because the path leading there was different for women. In other terms, hours spent in taking care of children and the house, are hours not spent in networking and building its own career.

But, the vertical exclusion mentioned above is just part of the broader picture, because even when women reach positions of power, they are often channelled towards specific roles by parties and institutions themselves. *Soft* policy areas such as Health, Education, Family, Environment tend to be favored than *hard* ones, like Finance and Defence, because these remain largely a male domain. This is *horizontal segregation*, and it mirrors the same *agentic* and *communal* divide discussed above. Women are more trusted with soft and caring side of governance, while the hard and powerful side is still reserved for men ¹⁰⁸.

Underlying this, brings something harder to eradicate: the political culture. Every institution is also a workplace, which means that is concerned with some formal and informal rules. The former are about infrastructures, resources, written rules that coordinate how the institution works, how much and where. Rather, informal rules are about unwritten guidelines that concern norms, habits and common practices that determine how things are really done, beyond the formal regulation: how members are expected to behave, to dress and to address to others. In politics, these informal rules have historically been shaped by and for men ¹⁰⁹.

Networking in politics is not an optional, it is essential. Political environments are uncertain and unsafe spaces, which means that individuals naturally tend to get close with who share similar values, norms and perceptions. This is why political networks are not random, but they are built around shared experience and the comfort zone of like-minded people. And,

¹⁰⁷ Lawless, J. L., & Fox, R. L. (2010). *It still takes a candidate: Why women don't run for office*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰⁸ Håkansson, S. (2023). *The gendered representational costs of violence against politicians*. *Perspectives on Politics*, 22(1).

¹⁰⁹ Runderkamp, Z. (2025). *Personal institutions, political lives. Diversity without inclusion in dutch politics*. UvA.

historically, those like-minded individuals were specifically white, highly educated, upper or middle class men. It is because of these men, who originally built these networks, that today power and knowledge still concentrate there, and it is within these networks that decisions are still largely made. Women and minorities have, clearly, built their own networks. But these are not the same, because they do not carry the same institutional weight or access to resources. Exclusion does not require intention. These networks generate exclusion just by existing, reproducing the same dynamics of trust and similarity that were never designed to include or exclude the others ¹¹⁰.

These structural barriers do not operate in isolation. These are sustained and reinforced through the use of media. How politics is covered by media, who they choose to portray and how, is not neutral: yet, it is part of that gendered system explained before, that still reproduce mechanisms of exclusion and barriers to women's participation.

2.1.3 Visibility and Backlash

How do media represent female politicians? Visibility in nowadays' society is a key factor, if someone is invisible in social media or does not appear through media, he does not completely exist, and it is the same about politics. Today, the media play a crucial role in shaping how people see and feel about politicians, this is the space where almost everyone develop its opinion about who holds the power and who is more suitable for office than others.

Yet, this role is far from being neutral. Research shows that women consistently receive different media coverage and treatment than their male counterparts. While they gain less media attention, the barrier to women's participation reveals also in not being quoted as much as men, and receiving less coverage of their political positions, especially when arguing about financial and strong issues. Runderkamp's et al. (2022) ¹¹¹conducted a research among Dutch parliamentarians and found that, while media's coverage emphasize identities of everyone but white man in the parliament, female politicians are usually described based on their gender, their ethnicity and their religion, much more than man. Their male colleagues

¹¹⁰ Bjarnegård, E. (2013). *Gender, informal institutions and political recruitment: Explaining male dominance in parliamentary representation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹¹ Runderkamp, Z., van der Pas, D., Schotel, A. L., Mügge, L. (2022) *Space invaders and norm-politicians: how the media represent the intersectional identities of Members of Parliament*. European Political Science Review. (14) 566-582.

rarely face the same treatment. The message, always repeated across media outlets over time, is subtle by strong, suggesting that women in politics are kind of exceptions.

When women are covered, media tends to focus on their appearance, their personal lives and their family's situation. Journalists and journals feel free to focus on women's clothing, status and physical characteristics, as if those details were useful in order to discuss political competence. It is a dangerous dynamic that brings people to focus not that much on their political role, but also on the private sphere of female politicians, minimizing their political presence and reducing their credibility as rulers, by emphasising their *invasion* in a place that was not made for them. That is why << *As their 'ability to rule' is still questioned in many quarters, their presence is important* >> ¹¹² . On the other hand, ethnic majority male politicians, whose are still seen as *the norm* in politics, are often mentioned by referring to their political ideology.

The result is a clear asymmetry. Men receive significantly more substantive and ideological media coverage, based on political issues. Women get their gender highlighted as something unusual. However, this problem is compounded when talking about women who belong to ethnic and racial minorities. As the same study show, as being very complete in this field, ethnic minority women are described by media in both terms: gender and ethnicity, gaining a double layer of non-political coverage. As a result, their ideological position receive the least media attention.

Beyond coverage, there is something more hostile at work. As commonly described by scholars, *Backlash* is a sort of punitive reaction that target women whose try to step outside the gendered expectations upon them. Krook and Restrepo Sanín, about this topic, define the gender-inclusive initiatives as activating:

<< *backlash and resistance to women's political integration, ranging from explicit acts of violence and harassment to sexism in media coverage and social media platforms, directed at women as women with the purpose of leading them to withdraw from political life.* >>¹¹³

Yet, backlash can be framed as that hostile resistance mentioned above. It is not random, it targets women entering politics, with the purpose to enforce traditional gender roles and to

¹¹² Runderkamp, Z., van der Pas, D., Schotel, A. L., Mügge, L. (2022) *Space invaders and norm-politicians: how the media represent the intersectional identities of Members of Parliament*. p. 567.

¹¹³ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Gender and political violence in Latin America. Concepts, debates and solutions*. Política y gobierno, 23(1), p. 126.

penalise female politician running for office or holding power. Those women are consistently escaping and breaking the expectations, by disrupting the hegemonic male domination once controlling the politics domain.

As discussed in the section 2.1.1, women in politics face a double bind, they are expected to be involved in communal policies, while leadership require agentic traits. Then, as Rudman and Phelan note, when a woman decide to behave as assertive, authoritative and strong politician, as a leader should be, she violates what sociality define her. In that way, she is attacked though her personal sphere and private life ¹¹⁴.

What makes backlash especially dangerous, as highlighted by Mona Lena Krook ¹¹⁵, is that it does not just harm its direct target, because attacking one woman, it sends a warning to every one watching. Yet, this is where backlash win, when female politicians are silenced or dropped off from politics, coerced into withdrawing from elections or pushed into invisibility. These dynamics are extremely threatening for the next generation of female politicians and, broadly, for democracy itself.

This mechanism works through what has been described in previous section as *silencing effect*. A form of symbolic violence that produce self-censorship among female aspirants, deterring them from entering politics at all. Consequently, it deeply harms democracy by eroding women's representation and the legitimacy of political institutions, which fail to reflect people's diversity. Recognizing backlash, then, it is a necessary step toward understanding VAWIP in its full complexity. Something that will be explored in detail in the next section.

¹¹⁴ Rudman, L. A., & Phelan, J. E. (2008). *Backlash effects for disconfirming gender stereotypes in organizations*. Research in organizational behavior, 28.

¹¹⁵ Krook, M. L. (2017). *Violence against women in politics*. Journal of democracy, 28(1)

2.2 Defining Violence Against Women in Politics: Forms, Actors and Contexts

The concept of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP) has gradually acquired broader institutional recognition over the past decade. Despite the wide introduction into concepts of violence and the role of gender into political context in the previous chapters, the core of this thesis rely in understanding what VAWIP actually means, which are the reasons, the forms and the actors involved.

Any discussion about VAWIP has to start with its international legal basis. Its foundation is the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a text adopted by the UN in 1979, which impose states to eliminate discrimination against women in every sphere of society.

The Convention describe female's discrimination as:

*<< [...] any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. >>*¹¹⁶

CEDAW's aim is to guarantee equal treatment to women and men, allowing women to vote, to hold public office and to participate in the formulation of policies. CEDAW posed the normative basis, but the UN's first operational definition of VAWIP came only several decades later.

The most authoritative definition about VAWIP comes from the United Nations (UN), when, in 2018 the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women reported to the General Assembly, defining VAWIP as including any act of gender-based violence, threats and acts that can result in physical, psychological or sexual harm, directed against women because of their gender¹¹⁷. Mainly, as Šimonović highlights, the report identifies the violence's aim as the preservation of traditional gender roles and stereotypes mentioned above, with the purpose to maintain male's dominance and structural inequalities. Crucially, the report does not treat VAWIP as a random phenomenon, it frames it as a deliberate mechanism with

¹¹⁶ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

¹¹⁷ Šimonović, D., (2018). *Violence against women in politics: Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences*. (UN Doc. A/73/301). United Nations General Assembly. <https://undocs.org/A/73/301>

specific target and purpose...keeping women out of politics. In the same year, UN Women, IPU, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) ordered an Expert Group Meeting upon VAWIP, where more than 40 experts convened together in New York, in defining this kind of threats towards female politicians and officials as a different form of gender-based violence, whose needed its own precise policies and directives ¹¹⁸.

Built on this international framework, regional institutions have further developed the concept of violence targeting female politicians. In 2022, the OSCE/ODHIR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) published an organic *Toolkit on Violence Against Women in Politics* ¹¹⁹. Here, VAWIP is framed as one the most pervasive barriers to women's full and equal participation in political life. Extending the definition beyond officeholders, this set of tools comprehend female aspirants and candidates as well, recognizing violence in acts of threatening political entrance and self-censorship. Moreover, the Toolkit further highlights the systemic consequences of violence, looking at how it weakens pluralism, inclusion and, consequently, democracy.

These institutional frameworks did not emerge in a vacuum, rather, they were shaped by a growing body of scholarship which redefined VAWIP as a concept in its own right. The foundational contribution comes from Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, political scientists that provide in 2016 the first academic definition of VAWIP as separate from violence against politicians in general, in that:

<< [...]distinct motivation of seeking to restrict the political participation of women as women – thereby [...] affecting not only the individual victim, but seeking to communicate to women and to society that women as a group should not take part. >> ¹²⁰

As the scholars note, these specific mechanisms cannot be explained just by describing violence in politics, however, it is not even possible to define as VAWIP every act directed to female politicians. As highlighted, the main difference is reflected by the purpose of the

¹¹⁸ UN Women. (2018). *Violence against women in politics: Expert Group Meeting report and recommendations*. UN Women.

¹¹⁹ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2022). *Addressing violence against women in politics in the OSCE region: Toolkit*. OSCE/ODHIR.

¹²⁰ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Violence against women in politics. A defense of the concept*. *Política y gobierno*, 23(2), p. 563

attack, violence targeting female politicians is better known because targeting women for being women. Here, a visual illustration of the key factors that determine whether VAWIP is taking place:

TABLE 1. Violence in Politics versus Violence Against Women in Politics

	Violence in politics	Violence against women in politics
Who	Opponents in other political parties, criminal gangs	Opponents in other parties, criminal gangs; but also members of a woman's own party, her family and friends, executive branch, civil servants, media and social media commentators, police and military forces
Where	Public sphere	Public and private spheres
When	During and around elections	During and around elections; during early preparations for elections and after women have taken their seats
Why	To alter election results, by preventing a group from voting or coercing electoral outcomes	To prevent women from exercising their political rights and, by extension, to communicate more broadly that women do not belong in politics
How	Physical and psychological violence, for example (threats of) murder, kidnapping, incarceration	Physical and psychological violence; but also sexual, economic, and symbolic violence, for example rape, public stripping, stalking, character assassination, destruction of campaign materials, on-line harassment and abuse

Figure 7. Differences between VAWIP and the general Political Violence (Krook, Restrepo Sanin; 2016)

Crucially, Krook and Restrepo Sanin frame VAWIP as a form of backlash, which means, as a sort of counter reaction driven by the increasing presence of women in the political sphere. In doing so, they list VAWIP as a hate crime, a violence that is not random, rather, which is ideologically motivated by hate, sexism and mysogyny.

Building on this, Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo (2020) pushed the definition further, they argued that gender does not only act in the *motive* of the attack, instead, VAWIP is determined also in the kind of attack that is used and the way the public interpret it. here, the three scholars were the first to classify the gendered dimension of political violence along three dinstinct categories: motives, forms and impacts. ¹²¹

¹²¹ Bardall, G., Bjarnegård, E., & Piscopo, J. M. (2020). *How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts*. Political Studies, 68(4), p. 924.

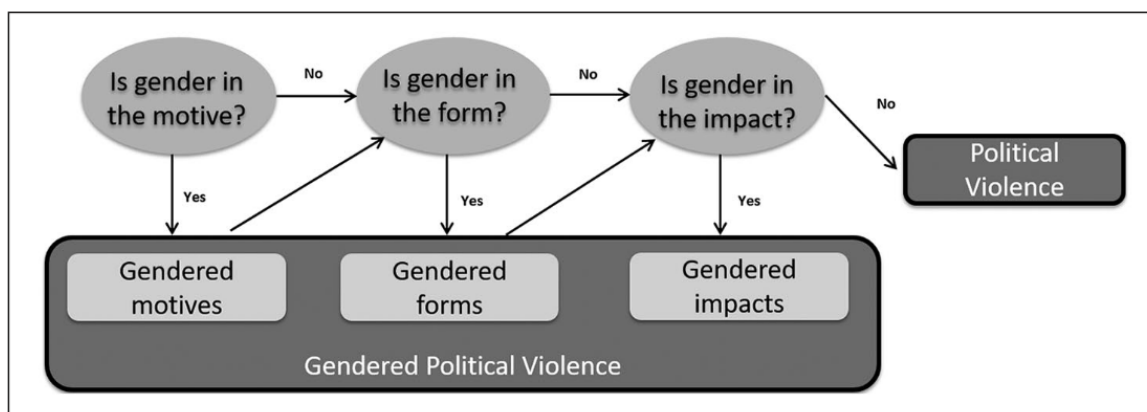


Figure 8 Gendered Political Violence: Motives, Forms and Impacts (Bardall, Bjanegård, Piscopo; 2020)

How to know if the attack is gendered? By *motives*, they refer to the reason why a woman is targeted, is the attack driven because of her gender identity, because of her political position or both? IPU/PACE 2018 found that female MPs active in the fight against gender inequality were more attacked. A woman politician who advocates for women's rights is targeted because of her political position and because she occupies a role that is traditionally male. Attacks which are gendered in the motives, are driven by the increasing number of women in politics during recent years and the counter persistence of gender stereotypes, along with the idea of politics being masculine. By *forms*, they mean the way in which the attack manifests. While men experience violence as well, has been noted that women experience it differently, there are many forms of political violence in which perpetrators rely, to attack driven by gender stereotypes. Where a man politician might receive threats related to his policy positions, his female counterparts is more likely to receive threats of sexualised violence ¹²². While by *impacts*, they refer to how does the violent act affects women, not just in terms of physical or psychological harm, but also in terms of a broader effect, such as discouraging other women entering and running for office or deciding to drop off. It is about how victims understand, report and respond to violence, which can affect politicians both in a personal and professional way. The case of Jo Cox illustrates this ripple effect clearly. Her death is widely cited in VAWIP literature as a clear example of gendered impacts about violence against women in politics: the British female Member of Parliament was murdered in 2016 by a white supremacist who was against her pro-immigrant point of view, was this attack motivated by her political ideology or because she enter a masculine domain? Despite this,

¹²² Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*.

what followed matters: female MPs become afraid to speak loud about certain policies and, in the following elections, significantly fewer women exposed as candidates.

That is clear evidence of violence affecting politicians in both personal and professional way, by losing confidence and deterring young women's political ambition.¹²³

What makes this framework valuable is that it demonstrates how gender can drive political violence even when it does not appear explicitly in the attack's motive. A female politician may be targeted just for political reasons, but the form the attack takes, as a sexual threats for example, reveals the gendered logic. These insights finally pushed VAWIP research beyond explicit misogyny cases, towards a more complete understanding of how gender logic permeates our societies.

Krook in 2017, highlighted how VAWIP is often dismissed just as "the cost of doing politics"¹²⁴. This expression tries to normalise violence targeting female politicians, and contribute to discourage women from entering, stay and advancing in politics. Across these contributions, one conclusion: Violence Against Women in Politics is far from generic violence that happens to women and men in politics, rather, it is a structural phenomenon whose purpose is to enforce traditional gender roles and maintain male dominance over the political sphere.

¹²³ Bardall, G., Bjarnegård, E., & Piscopo, J. M. (2020). *How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts*. Political Studies.

¹²⁴ Krook, M. L. (2017), *Violence against women in politics*. Journal of Democracy, 28(1), p. 84-85.

2.2.1 Forms and Manifestations

Defining VAWIP also means mapping its manifestations and the various forms it takes against female politicians. Among various attempts, as Krook and Restrepo Sanín¹²⁵ first developed, and subsequently refined by Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo in 2020¹²⁶, scholars describe VAWIP not as a singular phenomenon, rather, as a continuum of behaviors that can be grouped into five distinct categories: Physical, Psychological, Sexual, Economic and Semiotic violence.

This is a significant advancement over earlier typologies of political violence. While Krug et al. (2002) organised violence primarily by the nature of the act committed and the identity of the perpetrator, here, Krook and Restrepo Sanín centre the victim's experience. Moreover, semiotic violence is here understood as a distinct category, which was not addressed in earlier classifications. For this thesis, this new distinction is more valuable, it allows for the understanding of both visible and invisible dimensions of VAWIP. This classification has since become the common standard used by every major institution, including the ones already mentioned as IPU, NDI and the OSCE.

Types of violence against women in politics

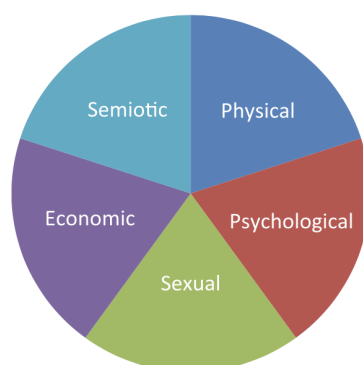


Figure 9 The 5 forms of VAWIP by Krook & Restrepo Sanín (2020).

By *Physical Violence*, Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016a) mean any acts inflicting bodily harm on women politicians or their family members, done with the purpose of preventing

¹²⁵ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Gender and Political Violence in Latin America; Concepts, Debates and Solutions*. *Política y gobierno*, 23(1) 127-162

¹²⁶ Bardall, G., Bjarnegård, E., & Piscopo, J. M. (2020). *How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts*. *Political Studies*.

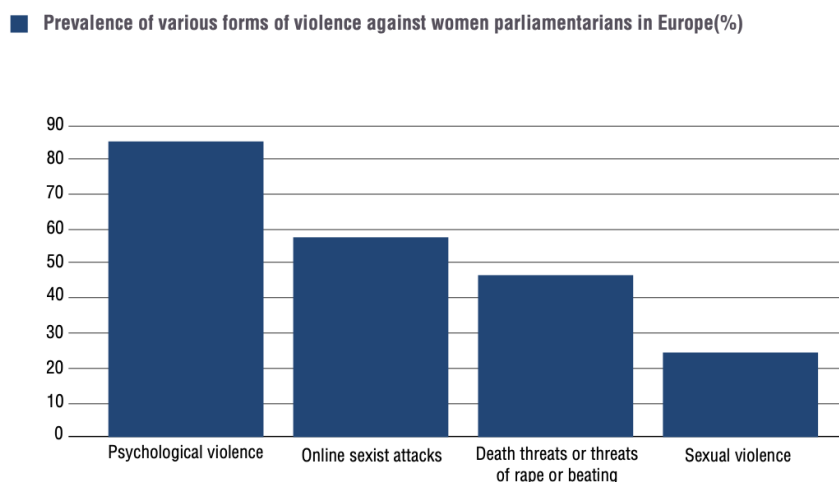
women's political participation. It includes murder, mutilation, beat, torture, but also receive unwanted touching. Compared to other forms, physical violence is less common. Perpetrators tend to favour less visible methods. Despite this, its occurrence is well documented across multiple political context, reported by IPU in its global survey in among women parliamentarians in 2016, they found out that 25,5% of respondents have been subjected to physical violence during their parliamentary term, occurring most frequently during political meetings and elections campaigns, adding that:

<< 20 % of those surveyed respondend that they had been slapped, pushed, struck or hit [...] during their term; 12.7 % said that someone had threatened to use or actaully used a firearm, knife or other weapon against them ... >>¹²⁷

Phychological Violence is consistently identified as the most widespread form of VAWIP. It targets mental and emotional wellbeing. It includes any hostile behavior which is intended to cause mental harm such as: fear, anxiety or emotional damage. It includes death threats, rape threats, stalking and systematic bullying in person or through digital platforms. (Krook and restrepo Sanin, 2016a). Data confirm its omnipresence: the IPU's 2018 European Study specify that 85.2% of female Members of Parliaments across Europe experienced psychological violence during their office, with 46.9% receiving death and rape threats (IPU, 2018).

¹²⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians*. p.5

Violence against women parliamentarians in Europe⁴²



Source: IPU & CoE, 2018, "Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe"

Figure 10. Prevalence of various forms of violence against women parliamentarians in Europe. (OSCE/ODHIR, 2022)

As illustrated in the Figure 9, Psychological violence emerges as the most pervasive form of harm experienced by women parliamentarians in Europe, affecting over 80% of respondents¹²⁸. These figures confirm that the various forms of VAWIP are not equally distributed, as psychological and online violence reveal to be everyday threats to female politicians' wellbeing, while physical and sexual violence, even if less frequent, are far from being marginal. To conclude, what is worth to be illustrated, is the gendered nature of psychological attack. As IPU (2016) note, female MPs reported being subject to constant judging about their physical appearance, their family roles and their sexuality, a kind of intimidation that is not occurring to their male counterpart.

Sexual Violence is about unwanted sexual comments online and offline, sexual assaults and coercion, including requests for sexual favours in exchanging political resources or opportunities. IPU's European Study shows that 24.7% of female MPs reported sexual harassment while doing their job, and that 75.9% were perpetrated by their male colleagues (IPU, 2018). Reporting sexual violence in politics is particularly difficult. Underreporting is widespread, driven by the stigma; the fear of retaliation and the short duration of a political position (IPU, 2016). In this field, Bardall et al., (2020) point to the #MeToo movement, which spread across the globe in 2017 and brought renewed attention to the nature of sexual

¹²⁸ OSCE ODHIR. (2022) *Introduction to Violence against Women in Politics. Addressing violence against women in politics in the OSCE region: Toolkit*.

violence within institutions. Despite this, it is important to take into account also the online sphere of sexual violence, which manifest in media platforms by sharing intimate messages, unreal intimate photos and sexual fake news, which weaponize women's credibility and reputation.

Economic Violence, then, reflects the economic deprivation and control, the economic harm and the property's damage of female politicians. Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016a) define it as:

<< acts seeking to control women's access to, or behavior in, the political realm by systematically restricting access to economic resources which are otherwise available to men. >>¹²⁹

Concrete manifestations of economic violence include the different salaries, the denial of staff members and covering travel expenses, but also vandalism and damage to properties. IPU (2016) found that 32.7% of women parliamentarians experienced some form of economic violence, whose 14.5% are about denied funds and 12.7% about denied resources, which were available to their male colleagues. Despite its frequency, economic violence remains one of the hardest form of VAWIP to recognise. Its subtle mechanisms of resource denial are easily mistaken for routine decision, rather than gendered discrimination. (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2016a).

The last category presented by Krook and Restrepo Sanín in 2016 (a) is about *Semiotic Violence*, later revised by Bardall et al. in 2020 as *Symbolic Violence*. This specific form of violence operates within the field of representation and public discourses, in which it targets women's in a broader way, by attacking female's legitimacy and political participation. As wide described by these scholars, this kind of violence takes symbolic forms of harm, by the use of masculine use of grammar, the spread of degrading images, the use of sexist language or sexual objectification of women. The concept, presented by Krook (2016a), refers to Bourdieu's theorisation of the present mechanism as a form of male domination, which is fixed in our societies and therefore difficult to recognise, adding that:

¹²⁹ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Gender and political violence in Latin America. Concepts, debates and solutions*. *Política y gobierno*. 23(1) p. 141

<< symbolic violence can be more powerful than physical violence because it is culturally embedded, making these forms of violence look or feel “right” (Galtung, 1990) >>¹³⁰

This form of violence has increasingly converged within digital technologies, and their rapid evolution has significantly amplified this phenomenon, raising concerns. The rapid evolution of digital platforms and the availability of generative artificial intelligence, enable the mass production of deepfakes images and automated online harassment by bot, targeting female politicians. The barriers have lowered and the speed of global dissemination makes it nearly impossible for victims to detect who the perpetrator is and to contain the spread of the message. That is why semiotic violence is, today, one of the least controllable threats to women's political participation. The convergence of Symbolic violence and the digital technologies has opened up to what many scholars now define as a sixth form of VAWIP: *Online Violence*.

While the creation of a new form of violence targeting women in politics, is not entirely digital technologies' fault, we must admit that their capacities have dramatically expanded the reach and the intensity of violence. Data from IPU (2018) reveal that online violence is the most affecting women MPs in Europe: almost 60% of female parliamentarians reported having experienced online violence during their term, making it the most reported form compared to threats of physical violence (48%), psychological harassment (28%), sexual harassment (25%) and physical violence (16%). Among these targeted women, IPU show that 58.2% have been subject of sexualized images and comments, with 66.7% of harms perpetrated in anonymity.

Petersen, Pedersen and Thau's research (2025) show how online abuse is disproportionately targeting female politicians more than men both quantitatively and qualitatively speaking. Online violence targeting women is more personal and explicitly sexual, perpetrated with the aim to let them out of politics ¹³¹. As Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2020) highlight, while everyday general online harassment aims to annoy, that directed at women politicians is sustained and explicitly sexual.

¹³⁰ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Gender and political violence in Latin America. Concepts, debates and solutions*. *Política y gobierno*. 23(1) p. 144

¹³¹ Petersen, N. B. G., Pedersen, R. T., & Thau, M. (2025). *Citizens' perceptions of online abuse directed at politicians: Evidence from a survey experiment*. *European Journal of Political Research*, 64(2), 790-809.

The proliferation of digital platforms made such attacks increasingly difficult to contain, a mechanism that rendered online violence one of the most rapidly growing threats to women's political participation today.

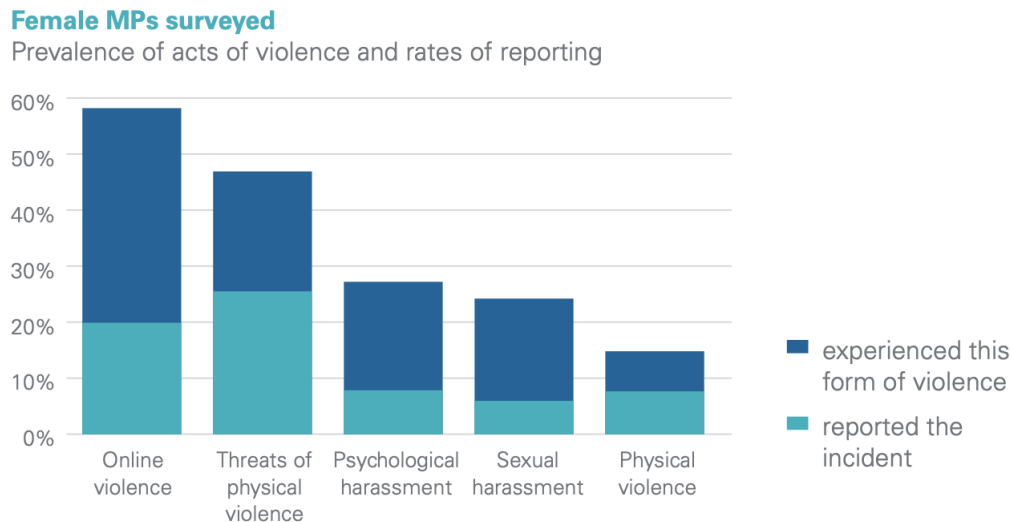


Figure 11. Prevalence of acts of violence and reporting rates among female MPs surveyed. (IPU; 2018 p.1).

As illustrated in Figure 10, IPU (2018) show that online violence is the most prevalent form of VAWIP experienced by female MPs, affecting 58.2% of respondents. The gap between occurrence and reporting is striking, and it points directly to the structural barriers that prevent victims from speaking out against perpetrators, by, at the same time, further reinforcing the silencing effect.

Despite literature present these six forms of violence separated from each other, in practice these are deeply interrelated. A single threat, such as a nude image of a female politician spreading online, may constitute psychological, sexual, symbolic and online violence at the same time. Scholars also document how these forms escalate over time, by shifting from economic and psychological violence into enabling the physical one. (Bardall et al., 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanin, 2016a). This escalation feeds the *silencing effect*: that pervasive dynamic of fear identified by Steinert, Koch and Pfeffer (2023). It shapes women's behavior at any stage in politics, already described in 2.1.3. This particular effect operates in two levels at the same time: at the individual and the systemic level. At the individual level, the silencing effect manifests itself in self-censorship, online withdrawal, hard policy avoidance and decision not to seek higher office or re-elections, or even, in the most severe case, the

decision to leave politics. IPU (2018) shows that 33.3% of women MPs surveyed declared to have changed their attitudes and behaviors due to acts of violence, by adding:

<< they admitted to “being more guarded” in what they said and in the stances they took, becoming “more cautious and more watchful” and seeking to be “a little less visible”. >> ¹³²

Moreover, women politicians also tend to withdraw from the online sphere by stopping reading comments and not answering anymore, some hesitate before posting on social media while others stop debating during tv shows. Steinert, Koch and Pfeffer document this directly. As their survey among MEPs found that women are significantly more likely than men to reduce their social media posts (17% vs 6%) and to decrease their public appearances (14% vs 0%), but even to change their tone and the nature of their content. ¹³³

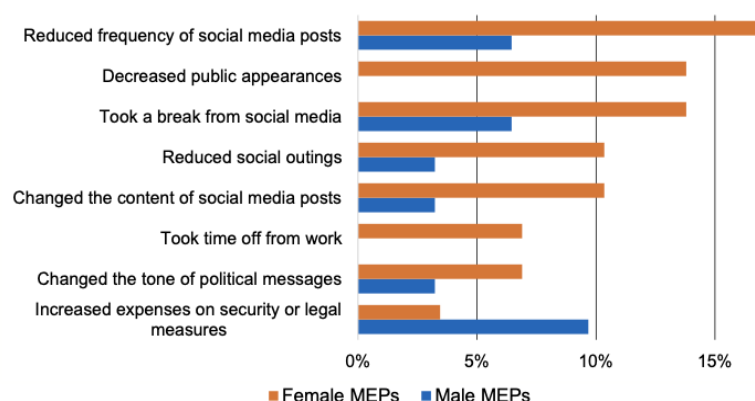


Figure 12. Silencing Consequences of Online Hate. (Steinert, Koch and Pfeffer; 2023; p.7)

As shown in Figure 12, the gap between female and male MEPs is particularly evident regarding public appearances, here no male are reported to have changed their presence, while 14% of women did. This suggests that online hate is effectively a mechanisms of female exclusion, whose effects are not just related to the virtual sphere.

Despite the personal reasons and choices, the systemic level in which the silencing effect takes place is even worst. In this sense, Krook and restrepo Sanin define VAWIP as “message

¹³² Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*. p. 10

¹³³ Steinert, J., Koch, L., & Pfeffer, J. (2023). *Online hate against members of the European parliament*. p.7

crime”¹³⁴ because of its ability to target individual women, while communicating to all female politicians at a time that politics is not their space. Every act of violence against a woman politician carries a multiplier effect. It deters the target and every woman watching. This is the dynamic that transform any individual violent act into a systematic mechanism of exclusion, the one that shapes political environment.

2.2.2 Actors and Perpetrators

With forms and definitions mapped, the next question is: who is involved? In literature there are listed two main dimensions: who is targeted and who perpetrate the violence. taken together, these dimensions reveal that VAWIP is not a marginal phenomenon, instead, it is structured into political life itself.

Who is the target of VAWIP? It affects women at every stage of the legislative recruitment model. From aspirants to well established female politicians at every level. However, as OSCE/ODHIR (2022) notes, it also extends to activists, party members and staff, with high impacts upon new generation of female politicians, by amplifying the silencing effect. ACLED’s data about the incidence of physical violence against women in politics ¹³⁵ develop around a classification of six (female) targets: Candidates for Office (8%), Politicians (12%), Political Party Supporters (24%), Voters (2%), Government Officials (16%) and Activists (38%). The high percentage of activists and party supporters targeted shows that VAWIP reaches well beyond elected officials. Women belonging to marginalised groups, where intersectionality is compounded, are often facing more abuses than the others. In that case, in *Not The Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics, a renewed call to action* (2021), the National Democratic Institute documents this pattern with concrete examples.

As described: << *Amnesty International found, for example, that Black and Asian women in the British parliament faced 30% more abuse on Twitter than their white counterparts.* >> ¹³⁶. Research consistently show that ethnic minority women face more hostile treatment than their white colleagues, at the same time, analyses from the U.S. about online abuse reveal that

¹³⁴ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016). *Gender and political violence in Latin America. Concepts, debates and solutions*. Política y gobierno. 23(1) p. 137

¹³⁵ Kishi, R., (2021) *Violence targeting women in politics: Trends in targets, types, and perpetrators of political violence*. ACLED.

¹³⁶ NDI, (2021). *#Not The Cost: Stopping violence against women in politics. A renewed Call to Action*. p. 15
About Dhrodia, Azmina. 2017. Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs. *Medium*, September 4.

women affected by compounded intersectionality are more affected than everyone else, because they are targeted across all these dimensions together (NDI, 2021).

About perpetrators, a useful guide to fully understand *who* drives violent and hostile acts against women in the political sphere, was publicated by UN Women and UNDP in 2018. Despite the Programming Guide ¹³⁷ investigates Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWE), it provides a complete table that might be essential to this research:

Political Actors	Societal Actors	State Actors
• Political party leaders • Election candidates • Political party members • Campaign workers • Party militia	• Voters • Family members • Intimate partners, spouses • Community members • Religious leaders • Media • Employers and colleagues • Criminal elements • Youth groups	• Police, armed forces • Government institutions • Election officials • State proxies (e.g. militia)

Figure 13. Different perpetrators acting against women during elections. (UN Women , UNDP; 2018)

UN Women and UNDP identify three broad categories of actors involved: Political, Societal and State ones, a classification that demonstrate how much vast the pool of perpetrators is. However, it also shows that violence does not occur just online by anonymous strangers or among parties by political opponents. VAWIP does not come only from outside. Violence against women in politics is a phenomenon which is embedded across the full range of actors that circulate around women politicians.

Among these three categories, proposed by UN Women and UNDP in 2018, scholars define the political party as the major resource of violence. Among these, Krook and Restrepo Sanin (2020) report from literature (NDI, 2018; UN Women 2014) evidence that, most abusers come from women's own political party; a finding that raises serious questions about women's safety and advancement within the party. Again, The Political Party Peer Network further underlines that:

¹³⁷ UN Women, UNDP, (2018). *Preventing violence against women in elections: a programming guide*. Summary. p. 3

<< After elections, women who are elected, and especially women who challenge traditional positions, often face VAWIP that aims to prevent them from pursuing a political career and participating in the political space >> ¹³⁸

VAWIP cannot be reduced to isolated acts perpetrated by individual actors. Rather, it is a broader ecosystem where violence is perpetrated and legitimised through the silence. Offenders are not limited to anonymous strangers or political enemies, they may be: party colleagues, party leaders, family members, journalists, media and institutional actors, whose do not need to inflict harm to be recognized as perpetrators, they just creates the condition for violence to persist. Recognizing this systemic architecture is what makes institutional responses necessary.

2.2.3 Contexts and Fields of Exposure

The previous sections demonstrate how VAWIP takes multiple forms and involves many different perpetrators. What the data reveal, is that this particular form of violence does not occurs casually, instead, it follows specific patters and it develops within institutional structures, careers path and specific policies. Examining these fields, this thesis promise to understand how VAWIP is deeply embedded into politics, operating with a specific gendered logic that operates by challenging women getting through traditional roles and boundaries historically imposed to them. The more women fight to hold office, to speak about cared issues and seek to reach high political position, the more they are exposed to hostile behaviors. In this sense, the exposure to VAWIP, can be read as a sign of transgression, by challenging traditional stereotypes and threatening gender roles. This section maps where and when VAWIP is most likely to occur: across institutional levels, career trajectories, policy areas and position of power.

Scholars show that occurrency, frequency and violent actors differ a lot across different institutional levels, considering: local, national and supranational level. On March 2018, in New York, an Expert-Group Meeting about VAWIP has been co-organised by UN Women, OHCHR and UN-SRVAW. Here, 40 experts from many fiels of study convened that GBV is a

¹³⁸ NDI; The Oslo Centre; Demo Finland; IDEA, (2022). *Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics: Benchmarks for political parties*. Political Party Peer Network. p.10

real threats against women in politics, reporting that, especially at local level, the political sphere, violence is highly perpetrated. As highlighted, they claim:

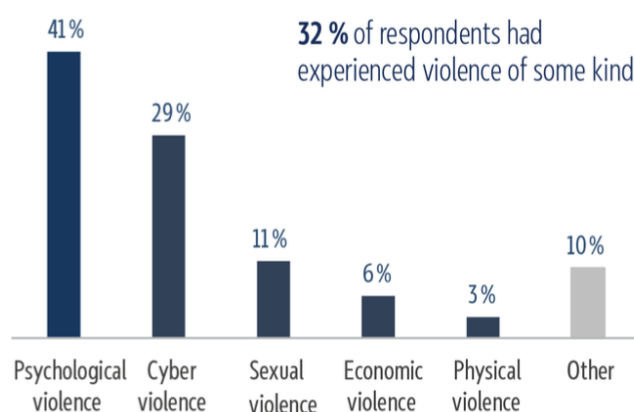
<< Women in local-level politics are particularly vulnerable. They are less protected by state institutions, which often do not have local offices, and are more exposed as they are more likely to know their perpetrators personally. Perpetrators are also more likely to know their victims' families and have easy access to their contact information. >>¹³⁹

As mentioned, the geographical and social closeness allows perpetrators to personally know victim's close relations, which is highly damaging when facing threats and harassment, but also symbolic and psychological violence, given that, as Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016a) note: *<< Accusations that a woman is a bad wife, mother, or daughter, for example, can be especially devastating in a small rural community, where families share a dense network of social ties, [...] >>¹⁴⁰*. Nonetheless, EU's empirical data evidence the prevalence of violence in local offices as well. As reported by the European Parliamentary Research service in 2025, a comprehensive European survey was conducted in 2023 by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), founding that 32% of elected female politicians who responded to questions, experienced some kind of violence during their political turn, and that *<< half of respondents considered that the level of violence had remained constant, while one third considered that it had increased. >>¹⁴¹*

¹³⁹ UN Women (2018). *Violence Against Women in Politics; Expert Group Meeting Report & Recommendations*. New York, March, 8-9. p. 40

¹⁴⁰ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanín, J. (2016a). *Gender and political violence in Latin America. Concepts, debates and solutions*. *Política y gobierno*. 23(1) p. 141

¹⁴¹ Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence against Women Active in Politics in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February. p.7



Data source: CEMR study, [Women in politics: European trends, 2024](#).

Figure 14. Types of violence experienced by the percentage of women local politicians who reported. (CEMR, 2024)

As Figure 14 shows, psychological and cyber violence are the most witnessed types of violence among local female politicians from 31 European State Members, where the survey focused.

However, when comparing local and national levels, these latter turn to be the place where gender abuses are more prevalent. As reported by EPRS (2025), there are many surveys investigating whether, at the national level, violence occurrence in European States is comparable to local levels. A 2021 French survey found that, was that 75% among 1000 female politicians working in the national context were targeted by sexual harassment, while just 1% of them was affected by physical violence. highlighting that << *Eighty-two per cent of respondents said they had suffered from acts of violence committed by elected colleagues, compared with only 31 % who had been attacked by a member of the public.* >> ¹⁴² At the same time, a comprehensive survey among politicians in Germany, conducted in 2020, illustrates this divergence by comparing the local and the national contexts, revealing that:

<< 40 % of women politicians had experienced some form of sexual harassment, either verbally or through touching. Such experiences are more frequent at federal than local level, and are more likely to affect politicians under the age of 45. >> ¹⁴³

¹⁴² Zamfir, I., 2025. *Violence against Women Active in Politics in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February. p.7

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*

At the supranational level, the European Parliament present a striking case: its formal gender equality framework often conceal pervasive informal practices. These, enable harassment and violence, particularly against staff members. Institutional data confirm that dynamic, by revealing high incidence of sexual harassment and psychological violence targeting female actors, which are almost exclusively perpetrated by male members of the European Parliament. Nonetheless, IPU and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council documented this phenomenon into *Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliaments in Europe* (2018), reporting about 45 European Countries and their own Parliaments. By reporting that << *there is an alarming amount of sexual and psychological harassment/bullying targeting female parliamentary staff in Europe* >>¹⁴⁴ they highlights that << *50 per cent of the female parliamentary staff interviewed said that in the course of their work they had been subject to sexist or sexual remarks, including witticisms and smutty jokes that were inappropriate.* >>¹⁴⁵ where, in 61.5% of cases these remarks were made by male Member of the Parliament and 34.6% by male colleagues. However, female MPs are affected as well, as << *67.9 per cent of the female MPs responding said that they had suffered sexist or sexual remarks several times in the course of their parliamentary term of office.* >>¹⁴⁶, especially through the online sphere, where 58.2% of female MPs were victims of sexual images and hostile comments among platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This power imbalance which explicitly links this violence to institutional hierarchies and the not suitable protection, especially for staff members, is then compounded with each institution's internal culture and informal rules. However, what links all these institutional levels is the occurrence of existing community networks and the rigidity of professional hierarchies, whose transform the theoretical legal protection into patriarchal resistance.

Understanding where VAWIP occurs is only part of the picture, equally fundamental is to understand *when* and how violence targeting women in politics intensifies, through the specific path towards leadership. By this point, it should be clear that Violence Against Women in Politics's aim promote the exclusion of female actors from the political sphere, which historically was reserved to men. These mechanisms of exclusion today adapts and

¹⁴⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*. p.5

¹⁴⁵ Ivi p. 8

¹⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 6

intensify across many stages of a female's politician career, starting during the electoral campaign.

During this phase, female aspirants are deeply disadvantaged by structural and targeted hostility. Carmen Alanis, in *Violence Against Women in Politics* (2020) explicitly claims about that female's disadvantage, by noting that:

<< Often, they are denied campaign resources or propped up as candidates in regions where they are sure to lose, either because few votes were won there by their political party in previous elections, or where they have no stronghold or previous experience. Having less experience in the political arena, fewer support networks and generally less material and human resources make it more difficult for women to campaign effectively with a serious chance of winning. A lack of financial resources affects women disproportionately. >>¹⁴⁷

Furthermore, women's suitability for office is systematically discredited by media through the use of gender stereotypes. Attacks generally focus upon women's ability to hold office, their leadership or even their ability to maintain their house duties while they are in charge, these dynamics are usually reinforced by media narratives such as newspapers and digital platforms by always asking about women's appropriateness, qualities and suitability, while driving most attention to what they are wearing and how, caring the most about their appearance.

Moving from the pool of aspirants and candidates, towards the higher position of elected officials, violence shifts too, increasingly questioning legitimacy. A particularly clear manifestation of this, emerges around gender quota: the institutional mechanism designed to "facilitate", or better, designed to *deserve* some seats to women's entrance in politics. Rather than being uniformly accepted as a useful and fair tool, a striking manifestation of backlash occurs, when gender quota reach the right opposite effect than raising the number of women: the fast growing number can lead to a counter reaction, due to the fact that, all of a sudden the status quo changes, as well as the traditional political power relations. In that way, the conservative side, define gender quota as thinking women in politics as not really deserving their seats, because they are there probably just because of quota, not thanks to their

¹⁴⁷ Alanis, C., (2020) *Violence against women in politics*. Kofi Annan Foundation. p. 34

capabilities. In that sense, backlash operates by increasing hostility towards women, provoking VAWIP ¹⁴⁸.

The higher a woman climbs, the more exposed she is. Visibility, in this sense, renders women more susceptible to gendered attacks. As Rheault, Rayment and Mususlan note that: << *women receive more uncivil messages as their visibility increases.* >>¹⁴⁹ For women, achieving high profile positions in politics is often linked to receiving higher volumes of abuses. Women are deeply more targeted than their male counterparts. Furthermore, as highlighted by Krook and Restrepo Sanín, when assessing the six criteria to detect bias against women: << *Third, the victim was engaged in activities related to his or her identity group. Political women in this scenario might be outspoken feminists, but they may also simply have sought to speak up for women.* >> ¹⁵⁰ demonstrating that << *Women who challenge gender roles in multiple ways - being outspoken feminists¹⁴ or ascending to prominent leadership positions (Davies 2014) - also seem to experience more numerous and more vitriolic attacks.*>> ¹⁵¹

Within institutional bodies, then, this resistance may manifests through systematic silencing and undermining authority by male subordinates, that do not accept to be directed by a woman, or even by appropriateness of women's idea and suggestion about certain issues , without credit them. Furthermore, despite formal grammar rules, it is even from formal recognition that semiotic violence can be directed, a clear example is reported by Krook (2020):

<< *in 2014, a conservative male MP in France repeatedly addressed the president of the National Assembly as Madame le Président (using the masculine form of "president"), despite her telling him multiple times to use Mdame la Présidente, the femenine form (Cotteret 2014)* >> ¹⁵²

Ultimately, women who take advantage of their political role and position to advocate for feminist policies, in order to try to change traditional norms, trigger the most aggressive

¹⁴⁸ Krook, M. L. (2016). *Contesting gender quotas: dynamics of resistance*. Politics, Groups, and Identities, 4(2), 268-283.

¹⁴⁹ Rheault, L., Rayment, E., & Musulan, A. (2019). *Politicians in the line of fire: Incivility and the treatment of women on social media*. Research & Politics, 6(1) p.5

¹⁵⁰ Krook, Mona Lena, and Juliana Restrepo Sanín. 2020 *The cost of doing politics? Analyzing violence and harassment against female politicians*. Perspectives on Politics 18(3) p. 747

¹⁵¹ Ivi p. 746

¹⁵² Ivi p. 745

forms of backlash, confirming the coercive mechanism in use with VAWIP, trying to discipline women and female leaders who deviate from historical gender roles. Violence Against Women in Politics, then, does not affect just the individual women, rather, it structurally modifies the distribution of policy domains. Backlash tends to emerge when female politicians actively challenge hegemonic male policy interests, opposing themselves to the established power structure (Håkansson, 2023). As Håkansson (2023) notes, certain policy domains are highly associated with the occurring violence, such as: << *migration, feminist issues such as men's violence against women or gender equality, were the most recurrent topics mentioned as attracting extensive violence when brought up in public debates.*>> ¹⁵³ while, respondents of an Irish survey among MPs, reported by EPRS (2025), showed that 40% of Members of the Irish Parliament experienced avoiding certain topics to not be exposed to violence, while the most frequently highlighted as *hot* and dangerous topics were: immigration (67%), women's rights (47%), housing and LGBTQIA+ issues both at 40%.

Beyond their legislative function, parliaments operate as symbolic stages where VAWIP produces its most visible effects. Within these spaces, when these dynamics happen through silencing, public humiliation and disregard, violence transcends the individual target by spreading a broader political message, which fosters a political environment which is hostile towards women (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016a). The visibility of these acts, amplified by newspapers and online platforms, enhances individual episodes of violence into women's collective obstacles, discouraging these latter's participation and incentivizing drops out.

Mapping forms, actors and contexts of VAWIP was a necessary step in order to recognize violence as a coherent and systemic dynamic of exclusion from democratic institutions. The patterns examined in this section, such as institutional levels, career trajectories and policy domains, reveal a coherent gendered logic in politics: the more women transgress rules and go beyond the limits imposed by historically male boundaries, the more they are targeted by hostile behaviors. Acknowledging that logic, the following section will examine how VAWIP functions as a structural mechanism of resistance to change.

¹⁵³ Håkansson, S. (2023). *The gendered representational costs of violence against politicians*. Perspectives on Politics, 22(1), p.10

2.3 Violence Against Women in Politics as a Structural Phenomenon

Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2020) theorised Violence Against Women in Politics as a systemic and structural phenomenon through the application of Johan Galtung's triad of violence. The theoretical framework is visually represented in the figures below:

Figure 15 illustrates Galtung's original Triangle of Violence¹⁵⁴, which identifies three dimensions: Structural, Cultural and Symbolic. These aspects are mutually reinforcing each others and describe the way in which violence is produced and reproduced within any social system. Figure 16 shows how Krook and Restrepo Sanín's adaptation to the specific dynamic of VAWIP, mapping each dimension into the gendered mechanisms of exclusion from politics. In this sense, *Structural Violence* is embedded into the historical association of politics with male dominance, *Cultural Violence* is inscribed as operating through misogynistic norms and sexual objectification, while *Symbolic Violence* culminates in delegitimisation of women from the political arena. Taken together, these two figures catch the shift from a more general theory about violence, to a gendered framework that positions VAWIP as a predictable outcome of patriarchal political structures (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2020).

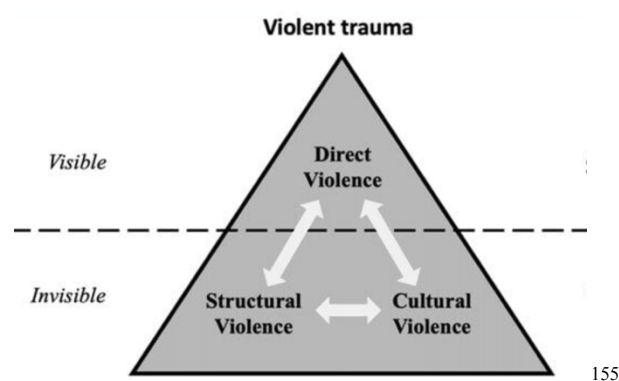


Figure 15. Galtung's Triangle of Violence, showing the three interconnected dimensions of structural, cultural and symbolic violence. (Galtung, 1990)

¹⁵⁴ Galtung, J., (1990) *Cultural Violence*. Journal of Peace Research. 27(3)

¹⁵⁵

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Galtungs-violence-triangle-with-themes-and-categories-of-evidence-discussed-in-this_fig3_378160802



Figure 16. Krook and Restrepo Sanín's application of Galtung's Triangle to VAWIP.

(Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2020; p. 742)

Structural Violence can be understood as the historically unequal access to power affecting women. Its origins are founded in earlier political theories, whose typically associated men with the public sphere, politics and finance, while strictly confining women to the private sphere of house and family, as noted by Krook and Restrepo Sanín, by mentioning Okin (1979): << *The structural origins of women's political exclusion stem from ancient and modern political theories associating men with the public sphere and women with the private.* >>¹⁵⁶

Again, this deep social divide that normalise women's marginalisation in the political arena, brings women to be perceived as Nirmal Puwar claims: *Space Invaders*, just being present, to the point that their mere presence in political institutions threatens the established patriarchal norms (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2016a). Consequently, structural violence also produces unequal life chances while directing hostility towards female leaders in charge, whose political participation is seen as a direct violation of traditional boundaries. Built upon this *structural* foundation, *Cultural Violence* provides, then, the reasons to perpetrate hostile behavior against women who overcome these gendered barriers. It work through sexist humour and sexual objectification. Shifting the moral perception of abuse, from unacceptable to tolerable

¹⁵⁶ Krook, Mona Lena, and Juliana Restrepo Sanín. (2020). *The cost of doing politics? Analyzing violence and harassment against female politicians*. Perspectives on Politics. 18(3) p. 742

As well explained by Krook and Restrepo Sanín:

<< Rape myths are one form: blaming survivors, they suggest that rapes are provoked by women's personal choices in clothing and behavior (Suarez and Gadalla 2010). Sexist jokes are another form of cultural violence, expressing antagonistic attitudes toward women under the guise of "benign amusement" (Ford 2000). Sexual objectification is a third common vehicle, reducing women to physical attributes and thereby denying their competence and full emotional and moral capacity (He ick and Goldenberg 2011). >>¹⁵⁷

At final, this process culminates into *Symbolic Violence*, identified by scholars as the *designed outcome* of VAWIP. This form of violence is particularly insidious as it relies on *Misrecognition*, where both, the dominant figure (men) and the dominated one (women) accept the patriarchal categories as natural, further reinforcing stereotypes that bring them at that point (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2020).

This Krook and Restrepo Sanín's conceptualisation of VAWIP being a political tool, designed within patriarchal structures, found concrete reinforcement in Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo (2020) view, when arguing that PV turns clearly gendered when perpetrators abuse in response to power given to marginalised groups, in order to preserve hegemonic male control over politics. This aligns with Keith Manne's point, reported by scholars, about misogyny as a systemic mechanism that attack women who deviate from their prescribed role : *<< In the case of women, their political activity defies traditional gender roles and norms, and those committing violence in response to this transgression have misogyny as their motivation. (Manne, 2017) >>¹⁵⁸* and again: *<< Misogyny distinguishes between "good" and "bad" women, punishing the latter for perceived violations of appropriate gender roles (Manne, 2018). >>¹⁵⁹*

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives clearly establish VAWIP as a systemic mechanism of gendered exclusion embedded in today's political structures. Yet, understanding why this violence still persists, requires a closer look at informal rules and

¹⁵⁷ Krook, Mona Lena, and Juliana Restrepo Sanín. 2020 *The cost of doing politics? Analyzing violence and harassment against female politicians*. Perspectives on Politics 18(3) p. 743

¹⁵⁸ Bardall, G., Bjarnegård, E., & Piscopo, J. M. (2020). *How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts*. Political Studies, 68(4), p. 918

¹⁵⁹ Krook, Mona Lena, and Juliana Restrepo Sanín. 2020 *The cost of doing politics? Analyzing violence and harassment against female politicians*. Perspectives on Politics 18(3) p. 742

institutional internal cultures, whose still privilege men and seems to resist to change. It is precisely this dimension that Feminist Institutionalism tries to highlight.

2.3.1 Gendered Institutions and Informal Rules: Feminist Institutional Perspective

Scholars like Waylen (2013), Kenny (2010), Mackay (2010) and Chappell (2006; 2010; 2013) advances (FI), a theoretical framework that links institutional analysis with feminist theory. The aim of FI is to examine both: how gender shapes, and how it is shaped by political institutions. Standing that, these latters, are not neutral. Therefore, political institutions are considered as gendered environments that reflect power asymmetries through formal and informal rules, already mentioned in earlier chapters ¹⁶⁰.

Differently from other lenses, Feminist Institutionalism do not focus juts on the numerical presence of women in politics, rather, it developes opun unwritten rules, informal practices and accepted behaviors that privilege men while disadvantaging women, operating behind those formal rules that drive the political environment ¹⁶¹. Even when formal measures like gender quota or anti-harassment codes of conduct are introduced, informal masculine norms tend to adapt, subverting progressive change rather than being dismantled by it. As highlighted by Berthet and Kantola:

<< Measures such as training and signatory codes of conduct do not change structural imbalances, which enable sexual harassment in parliamentary contexts. [...] institutional changes, such as they were, remained soft and powerless. >>¹⁶²

Here, central, is the concept of *hegemonic masculinity*. As reported by a study for the FEMM Committee, by the Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs in March 2018: Connell (2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as those masculine attitudes towards women and men not belonging to the way they are expected to be. Furthermore, it

¹⁶⁰ Berthet, V., (2022). *Mobilization Against Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament: The MeTooEP campaign*. European Journal of Women's Studies. 29(2). 331-346

¹⁶¹ Waylen, G., (2014) *Understanding Institutional Change from a Gender Perspective*. Working papers in Gender and Institutional Change n.1.

¹⁶² Berthet, V., Kantola, J. (2021) *Gender, Violence and Political Institutions: Struggles over Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament*. Social Politics 28(1) p.163

captures the masculine ideal that defines which men's behavior are appropriate or not within a specific social context, in add, those who do not conform are probably subjected to social exclusion or hostile behaviors targeting them.

<< gay men conforming to stereotypes may be bullied as they behave in an atypical way to what is expected by group members in terms of what is considered the contextually prevailing masculine ideal or what Connell (2005) refers to as 'hegemonic masculinity'.>>¹⁶³

In that way, Kantola and Lombardo ¹⁶⁴ describe political arenas as spaces that reward aggressive speaking styles, where masculine ways of interactions constitute the standard of political legitimacy. This culture describes what Miller (2021) calls the symbolic “tone of the voice”. An atmosphere conveying that political spaces were not made for them. In this context, VAWIP function as a tool, deployed to preserve male domination in a field that has always been male, in such way, by directing hostility against women, perpetrators try to communicate a broader political message, seeking to silence women's voices and coerce them to drop out from politics, or better saying that *<< Therefore, it can be concluded that VAWIP in fact contributes to the withdrawal of women from politics in two ways: it literally keeps them out of politics, but it also significantly removes their input while they are active in politics. >>¹⁶⁵*

These structural dimensions carry democratic consequences that cannot be ignored. VAWIP has been framed by many scholars as a structural threat to representative democracy, not just as a violation of the individual rights of women targeted. As such, the NDI (2021) reported VAWIP as compromising the integrity of democratic processes, by marginalising women's voices and preventing political outcomes, like for women to be represented. By this point, Håkansson (2023) further demonstrates that, targeting female politicians may have immediate consequences for representation, by disrupting the fundamental link between citizen's and governance. In this sense, VAWIP is not just a symptom of governmental failure, rather, it is

¹⁶³ Hoel, H., & Vartia, M. (2018). *Bullying and Sexual Harassment at the Workplace, in Public Spaces, and in Political Life in the EU: Study*. European Parliament. p.80

¹⁶⁴ Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2023). *The European Parliament as a gender equality actor: A contradictory forerunner*. In *Handbook of feminist governance* (pp. 299-310). Edward Elgar Publishing.

¹⁶⁵ Van Bavel, A., (2022) ‘*The issue is not getting but keeping women in politics*’: *The impact of violence against women in politics in the Belgian context*. *Tijdschrift voor genderstudies* 25(3) p.244

also a cause of representational degradation. It is against this dynamic that institutional responses must be presented.

2.4 Institutional Responses: Between Recognition and Inaction

The previous section established VAWIP as a structurally embedded mechanism of gender exclusion, sustained by informal institutional norms and hegemonic masculine culture, remarkably resistant to change. Yet, this cultural depth raises questions: Did political institutions recognise the problem? Did political institutions answer to it? Then, why actions are still insufficient?

The following section tries to respond to this question by examining the institutional landscape of responses about VAWIP, tracing the trajectory from the formal recognition among international and supranational actors to their concrete tools, empowered to solve the problem. In doing so, it looks for the gap between the formal commitment to protect women in politics and the structural inaction that still attempt to meaningful change. As the analysis will further show, recognition of the problem does not mean women's protection, as the distance between recognizing the issue is still far from effectively addressing it.

2.4.1 Naming the Problem: International and Supranational Recognition of VAWIP

Historically, Violence Against Women in Politics has been a largely invisible phenomenon. As reported by the 2021's NDI report, abuse was so embedded into the political culture that women came to accept it as normal, as it was part of the political experience:

*<< A key reason is that women are frequently told that facing abuse, harassment and assault is simply “the cost of doing politics”. As a result, many dismiss or ignore violence as a normal part of the political game. >>*¹⁶⁶

Furthermore, the consequences of this silence extends beyond the individual, rather, it allows the normalisation of violence, producing serious damage to democratic female representation and to gender equality. Although women's right to participate freely in politics had been formally protected by international human rights law as the Article 7 of the 1979 CEDAW Convention, the early frameworks addressing to VAWIP, left women's vulnerability uncovered. Yet, the first significant step came in 2017, when the CEDAW Committee revised its General Recommendation on GBV, while introducing an explicit reference to female politicians as a special category of targeted actors¹⁶⁷.

Building on this foundation, a further milestone in the international recognition of VAWIP is of Dubravka Šimonović, 2018 Special Rapporteur's report. This was the first attempt to formally define VAWIP as a phenomenon within the UN framework (Zamfir, 2025). Before that, those systemic dynamics received little attention, while, with the advent of the present Report, particular concern has been raised about the deterrent effect on young female aspirants. Again, the Special Rapporteur, as highlighted by Zamfir (2025), established that the formal difference between women and men, both experiencing violence within the political context, acts targeting women are often distinctly directed to them because of their gender, with the aim to discourage female as a group from exercise their democratic rights. Crucially: *<< The aim of violence against women in politics is to preserve traditional gender*

¹⁶⁶ NDI, (2021). *#Not The Cost: Stopping violence against women in politics. A renewed Call to Action*. p. 17

¹⁶⁷ Zamfir, I., 2024. *Violence against Women Active in Politics in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation*. European Parliamentary Research Service, February.

roles and stereotypes and maintain structural and gender-based inequalities.>> ¹⁶⁸

Furthermore, the Report drew attention to the ever growing dimensions of online VAWIP, warning about online platform used as weapons to spread disinformation, targeting female active politicians and aspirants ¹⁶⁹.

This growing awareness found empirical grounding in 2016. Here, the Inter-Parliamentary Union conducted the first worldwide survey mapping sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians, in 39 countries. As expected, findings confirmed that the dynamic affecting female politicians was not confined to any specific country, rather, it reveals VAWIP as affecting women across all regions, to various degrees. Furthermore, IPU's findings reveal psychological violence to be the most pervasive form of hostile behavior targeting women, reported by over 80% of respondents being targeted by male colleagues or male belonging to their own institution (IPU, 2016). The survey also documented that women parliamentarians are highly affected by their appearance and behavior outside the political sphere. Their personal lives, as well, are constantly under scrutiny. Yet, IPU framed their research as a democratic concern by stressing the need to address to VAWIP, in order to reach gender equality oriented parliaments.

Then, two years later, IPU reframed its research to the European context by sharing its scope with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), this time not just focusing on women parliamentarians but extending the range to parliamentary staff (IPU/PACE, 2018). Despite the general idea about European Institutions' diligence, the findings reinforced the global picture: over 85% of female MPs confirmed having experienced psychological violence, while more than an half reported having been targeted though online platforms. Furthermore, the study identifies some aggravating factors such as age and job position, by alarming the situation of parliamentary staff members. As well described, under 40 female MPs are disproportionately targeted by sexist remarks and online abuse, while over 40% of staff members report having experienced sexual harassment, usually perpetrated by male MPs. The study concluded by calling on European Parliament to adopt a zero-tolerance approach, to act as a role model in both, policies and practices ¹⁷⁰.

¹⁶⁸ Šimonović, D., & Secretary-General, U. N. (2018). *Violence against women in politics: note/by the Secretary-General*. p.5

¹⁶⁹ OSCE PA. (2021) *Violence Against Women Journalists and Politicians: A growing crisis*. Annual report

¹⁷⁰ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*.

Within the European framework, as reported in EPRS briefing by Ionel Zamfir (2025), PACE took a step forward with the Resolution 2274/2019, framing sexism and VAWIP as a direct threat to the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Overall, the Resolution served as dismissing the widespread tendency to consider these gender-driven attack as inevitable consequence of being active in politics, a normalisation problematized as one of the main obstacles to womens, by the NDI 2021 report. This Resolution stressed Parliaments to review their internal regulations about protection, immunity and backlash ¹⁷¹. Yet, to enforce the institutional effort, NDI (2021) presents the Council of Europe's *Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on Preventing and Combating Sexism* as providing further frameworks to prevent sexism over political life, especially against women. This, by confirming how female politicians are disproportionately affected by online sexual violence, while claiming for radical change through legislative and institutional responses through actions like persecuting hate speech, promoting a positive women representation and introducing disciplinary mechanisms like suspension and financial penalties for perpetrators ¹⁷².

However, despite the evergrowing institutional framework, the formal recognition of VAWIP is still fragmented and restricted by many limitations. As Carmen Alanis note, in *Violence Against Women in Politics* (2020) by saying:

<< the definition and formal classification (crime or offense) in national law of violence against women in politics has not advanced, nor has it progressed in formal recommendations at the international level. There is enormous resistance worldwide.>> ¹⁷³

As such, the definition of VAWIP has made little progress within the national and international fields, blocked by the everpersistent backlash worldwide. Yet, while instruments like the UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130 (2011), as reported by Alanis are:

<< called on all states to act and asked the United Nations [...] to consolidate state assistance in their national efforts to “investigate allegations of violence, assault or harassment of women elected officials and candidates for political office, create an environment of zero tolerance for such offences and, to ensure accountability, take all appropriate steps to prosecute those responsible”. (UN, 2018) >>¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ OSCE ODHIR (2022) *Addressing violence against Women in Parliaments. Addressing violence against women in politics in the OSCE region: toolkit*. Tool 2

¹⁷² NDI, (2021). *#Not The Cost: Stopping violence against women in politics. A renewed Call to Action*

¹⁷³ Alanis, C., (2020) *Violence against women in politics*. Kofi Annan Foundation. p. 28

¹⁷⁴ *Ibidem*

There are no VAWIP specific international framework adopted yet. Following this path, even CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention do not explicitly address the political sphere when criminalising violence against women (OSCE, 2022). This legal gap persist in a conceptual legal fragmentation among different institutions and how do they define the problem. The varying terminology uses are highlighted by Krook and Restrepo Sanín as well, noting how vocabulary referring to VAWIP changes depending on the context in which it is used. As reported, UN Women and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) frame the phenomenon within election times, while Latin American frameworks differ from political violence and political harassment and, other institutions, differ even in the classification of violence forms themselves ¹⁷⁵. Yet, due to this definitional incoherence it turns hard to measure data and to develop a shared framework among institutions all over the world, directly obstructing an effective cross-national response.

2.4.2 The Implementation Gap

While the previous section has demonstrated the progressive institutional recognition of VAWIP, tracing different frameworks developed within international and supranational contexts... the urgent question is: why is there a *Gap* between formal measures undertaken by institutions and the persistence of VAWIP inside the same ones? Why do those responses fail to produce a meaningful change? As shown, despite anti-harassment policies, codes of conduct and equality measures, the persistence of gender based violence in politics, within institutions, highlights that, maybe, the problem cannot be fixed just through formal tools. It is essential, then, to look beyond regulations, investigating informal rules, internal institutional culture and power dynamics that evolve into them. Finding new shortcuts to the real political change.

In literature ¹⁷⁶ Waylen and Chapelle are usually referred as *Institutionalist scholars*, advancing differentiation between formal and informal institutions. It is precisely here that the gap is taking shape. Formal institutions operate through official channels and explicit procedures, while informal ones are driven by unwritten norms and cultural expectation. And,

¹⁷⁵ Krook, M. L., Restrepo Sanín, J., (2020) *The cost of doing politics? Analyzing violence and harassment against female politicians*. Perspectives on Politics 18(3)

¹⁷⁶ Ahrens, P., Elomäki, A., & Kantola, J. (2022). *European Parliament's political groups in turbulent times*. Palgrave Macmillan.

as argued by Waylen: << *Any form of institutional change is going to involve both the formal and informal interacting together in ways that need to be investigated.* >> ¹⁷⁷ Applied to VAWIP, this means that any equality measure introduced will always increase against the institution's internal structure, which tends to remain untouched. Furthermore, this help understand Waylen's *layering* idea (Waylen, 2014). Mentioning that, as scholars note, when an institution adopts new codes of conduct, these are rarely transformative: << *We read them as examples of layering in institutional change, where new rules are introduced on top of old ones and not in competition with them.* >> ¹⁷⁸

An example of this dynamic is the Canadian case. Here, in 2015, a code of conduct has been adopted to contrast sexual harassment against MPs. Despite the concrete illustration of the problem, core institutional norms, including the speaking style and the party discipline remained unmodified. As reported by Berthet and Kantola (2021), the scholars Collier and Raney (2018) described the Canadian code as just a block of new rules *nested* upon the old ones. Noting that, rather than protecting MPs from threats and harassment, these codes went reinforcing the patriarchal practices under, bypassing change. This case exemplifies exactly what Waylen was referring to by speaking about *layering*, highlighting that, without a solid structural change of informal institutions dynamics, new formal rules are absorbed in the damaged political system ¹⁷⁹. Yet, a similar example of gender equality implementation occurred in Bolivia with the Law 243(2012). Despite it has been defined as the first worldwide legislation, specifically criminalising gendered political violence and harassment against women politicians, its functioning was not the one promised, or better: << *has not achieved its innovative goals.* >> ¹⁸⁰. As reported by Krook and Restrepo Sanin (2016a), among almost three hundred cases reported, just one reached successful resolution. Reasons rely on misrecognition of VAWIP as a distinct form of discrimination, that vary from political violence in general and from violence itself.

However, the Bolivian and the Canadian cases are not isolated ones, rather, they reflect a pattern that worldwide research data confirm. To prove it, the IPU/PACE (2018), a study based on surveys among female MPs and female members of staff in more than forty

¹⁷⁷ Waylen, G., (2014) *Understanding Institutional Change from a Gender Perspective*. Working papers in gender and institutional change n.1 p. 11

¹⁷⁸ Berthet, V., Kantola, J. (2021) *Gender, Violence and Political Institutions: Struggles over Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament*. Social Politics 28(1) p. 162

¹⁷⁹ Berthet, V., Kantola, J. (2021) *Gender, Violence and Political Institutions: Struggles over Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament*. Social Politics 28(1) p. 146

¹⁸⁰ Krook, M. L., & Restrepo Sanin, J. (2016). *Gender and political violence in Latin America. Concepts, debates and solutions*. Política y gobierno. 23(1) p. 148-149

European Countries, provides useful frameworks. Showing how much hostility against women is increasing widespread within Parliaments, they also examine the act of reporting and denouncing sexism, harassment and VAWIP within European legislative institutions. Data show that, comparing to the amount of violence occurring, there is a very low level of reporting: only 23.5% of female MPs and just 6% of female parliamentary staff targeted by sexual harassment, decided to report the violence. Furthermore, even when physical threats occur, only 50% of female parliamentarians reported the abuse to dedicated sites (IPU/PACE, 2018).

Here below, a clear visual context of the situation explained by IPU and PACE:

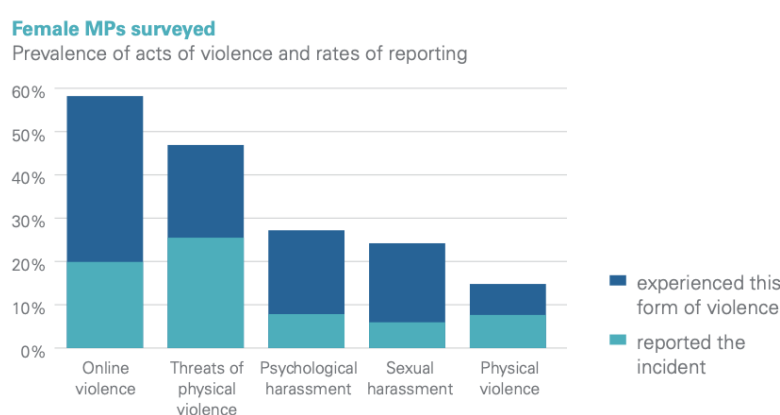


Figure 11. Percentage of acts of violence occurring and rates of reporting among female MPs surveyed. (IPU/PACE, 2018)

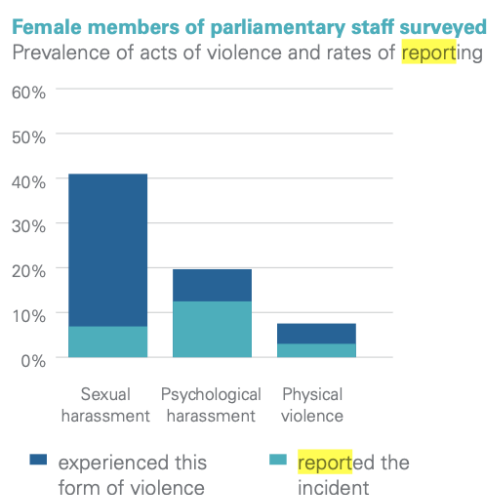


Figure 17. Percentage of prevalence of acts of violence occurring and rates of reporting among female staff members of Parliaments surveyed. (IPU/PACE, 2018)

The gap between experiencing violence and reporting, is always dramatic, affecting both MPs and staff members. While female MPs show a low rate of reporting across all forms of violence, the parliamentary staff situation is more pronounced. The vast majority of staff members who experienced some kind of violence, especially targeted by sexual harassment are found to not formally report. Yet, this reflects the vulnerability of those who are probably not as protected as MPs. At the same time, global data from NDI (2021) reinforce the low-reporting pattern: among women who experienced violence during party service, only 66% of respondents admit having reported the incident to someone, while 28% told absolutely no one. Despite this, between those that reported, only 26% approached a competent party authority while a mere 9% addressed to the police (NDI, 2021). Those data reflect a pervasive problem of underreporting of VAWIP, whose causes are commonly attributed by scholars to a profound fear of retaliation and career damage. In politics, acknowledging victimhood is often seen as a sign of weaknesses, because it is a field that structurally requires *agentive traits*. As such, as NDI (2021) note, many female politicians and staff members act and behave in a way that is far from being labelled as not suitable for holding office or not aligned with the political environment. These dynamics have been captured by IPU/PACE (2018)'s interviews with women parliamentarians across European countries, whose stated:

<<I didn't report the incident because it would have been a sign of weakness. When you are in politics, you are supposed to be strong and handle anything >> ¹⁸¹

And again,

<<Reporting sexual harassment further victimizes you. I spoke to my party leader about the colleague who was harassing me and since then he no longer comes on missions abroad.>> ¹⁸²

Just two out of many testimonies revealing how the culture of silence is embedded into political institutions, as demonstrated, the act of reporting is not always seen as a right, rather, is often perceived as a risk. However, beyond the fear of retaliation, a further obstacle runs in the very recognition of the problem. NDI (2021) specifically refers to the unrecognition of

¹⁸¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*. p.9

¹⁸² *Ibidem*

violence from victims themselves, further noting that targeted women may not even recognise what happened to them or may not understand it as a form of violence. A kind of violence that further contributes to the hidden nature of the present phenomenon for the NDI, that also add: << *It carries the clear message that women should not participate in public life: women experience it in private, in public and in 'protected' public spaces.* >> ¹⁸³

Yet, this reluctance of women politicians in protecting themselves from violence is also directed by a sort of party discipline and loyalty devoted to the institution. As highlighted above, the NDI (2021)'s report on political parties across specific parts of the world, define political parties as always functioning as a *Protected Public Space*, which means that in these environments, perpetrators and victims are colleagues, bounded together by loyalty ties and shared identity of the institution, and that:

<< *these attributes, manifest in formal and informal custom and practice, create a complex set of internal dynamics that must be understood in order to begin to address the barriers within parties that subvert women's participation.* >>¹⁸⁴

Furthermore, as it is largely demonstrated into *Not The Cost: Violence Against Women in Politics Program Guidance* (NDI, 2017), what makes these phenomenon even less visible is the internal management of gender-based violence, which is routinely suppressed and administreted inside the institution, as it was part of internal affairs rather than being a right violation. The reason NDI addresses is toward the security and the protection of institutions and parties' public image, often not regarding at member's defence. On these basis, female politicians are bring to be more subjected to self-silencing, due to the intense informal pressure, as one parliamentarian stated:

¹⁸³ NDI, (2021). *No party to violence: analyzing violence against women in political parties. Preliminary Findings from Pilots in Côte d'Ivoire, Honduras, Tanzania, and Tunisia.*

¹⁸⁴ NDI, (2021). *No party to violence: analyzing violence against women in political parties. Preliminary Findings from Pilots in Côte d'Ivoire, Honduras, Tanzania, and Tunisia.* p.2

<< *To put an end to impunity, you must name the offenders, even in parliament. But you don't want to expose people from your own party. You are an elected representative dependent on your voters and it's above all a question of loyalty.* >>¹⁸⁵

As reported above, even the party loyalty may be a reason of self-censorship in reporting, not by coercion but just to reach that feeling of belonging to that space, the one that at first, was not made for women.

Ultimately, even when women have the intention to report, is not always that easy to attempt. Women, often face institutional cultures of victim-blaming and scepticism. As such, scared to be labelled as *playing the victim*, a claim that reinforces their not belonging there, many women choose silence over reporting. Krook and Restrepo Sanin (2020) also explain how the moral responsibility of VAWIP in the political context often shifts from perpetrators to victims. Normalising the abuse making reporting feel shameful. Moreover, these scholars note that abuses are also being normalised through the justification of attacks, like rape and sexual threats, with women's clothing and women's choices about discussing certain types of policies and political issues. These dynamics manifest concretely within institutions, as described by Sandra Håkansson, when saying that << *Speaking up against harassment is associated with risks of appearing overly sensitive and weak.* >>¹⁸⁶

And again, from a Swedish women politician interviewed:

<< *The ones that are very open and talk about these things with their colleagues are unfortunately seen as a bit whiny, that you should be able to take a whole lot of this.* (Woman-23) >>¹⁸⁷

While, at the same time, a perception documented among male respondents of the same survey, accuse women to frequently exaggerate and to strategically play the victim role to attract media attention or political attention. As well, the informal idea of the *ideal politician*, deeply explained before, here returns through the ideal of toughness, which concretely delegitimise women's experiences while enforcing and suggesting *silence* as the expected

¹⁸⁵Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*. p.12

¹⁸⁶ Håkansson, S. (2023). *The gendered representational costs of violence against politicians*. Perspectives on Politics, 22(1), p.9

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*

response to abuses. To illustrate this dynamic, those reported interviews, driven by Håkansson, cite:

<< My view is that it's stupid to go out publicly and snivel and "Oh, I've been threatened" and such things. There was [a politician] that did so now, and I think it's inappropriate. Because if you really have a threat, if it really is something serious, then you just risk it escalating if you do that. (Man-9) >>¹⁸⁸

<< In general, I've always been a bit annoyed at politicians who parade that they've received hatred (laughs). I can be like what the heck, you've chosen this profession, you're a public person, you should be able to handle it... . There's no taboo or anything. On the contrary, I think people (laughs) talk too much about it. Or I think people talk, I think people exaggerate things. (Man-2) >>¹⁸⁹

As demonstrated, this culture of victim-blaming is not personal nor internal to specific parties, rather, it is reinforced by institutional scepticism. IPU/PACE (2018) document how several respondent to their one-to-one conversation with female MPs and parliamentary staff, reported no service mechanisms into their parliament where to address harassment attacks or VAWIP in general, while others revealed scepticism about the effective functioning of these internal reporting mechanisms. Then, in general, this bring to suppose that, when formal channels oriented to reporting do exist, these are often perceived as inadequate or inaccessible

Furthermore, another gap emerge. These dynamics lead the act of reporting as frequently disposing a *secondary victimisation* phase for women. In such context, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) define this particular kind of victimisation as the harm caused, not by the original act, rather, by the way in which institutions deal with the victim. This includes insensitive questioning, inappropriate language and treatment that compounds the original harm ¹⁹⁰.

¹⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 10

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁹⁰ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2022). Addressing Violence against Women in Parliaments: Tool 2. *Addressing violence against women in politics in the OSCE region: Toolkit*. OSCE/ODHIR. citing EIGE's Glossary and Thesaurus.

The picture that emerges is troubling. It is shown as, formal reporting mechanisms is frequently turning into new sites where harm targets women, rather than offering protection as these are supposed to do. At the same time, the institutional culture is seen as enabling VAWIP while, deterring ways to report and discouraging who try to do it, often punishing them. Due to this structural problem it is fundamental today to question whether institutions are able to reform and to guide themselves, a particularly urgent question when examined in the context of the European Parliament.

2.4.3 Towards the European Parliament

The dynamics studied in the previous section, such as the gap between the formal recognition and the actual inaction of institutions, the ever lasting resilience of informal hegemonic masculine norms and the structural barriers that enact the victim's silence; are particularly relevant to study the European Parliament. Yet, the EP offers a precise lens through which examining these dynamics.

Within literature, the European Parliament is frequently presented as the most gender equal institution within the EU decision-making system, also widely considered as a safeguard of gender-friendly policies and a promoter gender equality frameworks (Berthet & Kantola, 2021; Kantola & Lombardo, 2023). Scholars are also used to mention the high rate of women's representation, a number that has increased reaching the record of 40.4% in 2019 elections, adding that it has historically an higher percentage of women's representation in comparison to national parliaments. Despite this historical trend, the 2024 European Parliament elections marked a significant setback. For the first time in its history, the number of female elected MEPs declined compared to the previous election, falling from 40.7% in 2019, to 38.7% in 2024 ¹⁹¹. Despite this, it is usual to address to the European Parliament as the most democratic actor because it holds up European values such as: equality, human rights, citizen rights, gender equality and LBGTQIA+ rights, based on the *Article 2 of The Treaty on European Union*, whose establish those values driving democratic equality and equality between genders:

¹⁹¹ EIGE. (2024). Despite hopes for progress, European Parliament elections led to a decline in women's representation. EIGE.
<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/data-talks/despite-hopes-progress-european-parliament-elections-led-decline-womens-representation>

<< *The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.* >>¹⁹²

Yet, this robust formal commitment is almost contradicted by a deep paradox. As Berthet and Kantola ¹⁹³ argue, naming Manne ¹⁹⁴ the presence of sexual harassment within any institution symbolically indicates women their subordinate level, suggesting that, maybe, it is not their place, and their role is not the same as men's ¹⁹⁵. As the EP's own resolution firstly admitted, harassment still occurs across the EU institutions. Here, reporting rates are still lower, victims are not receiving the needed support and a culture of impunity still persist. This paradox is maybe the most explicitly acknowledged by the institution itself: in the *European Parliament Resolution of 1 June 2023 on Sexual Harassment in the EU and MeToo Evaluation*, the European Parliament formally recognised to not constitute a safe workplace. Meanwhile, formally admitting that sexual harassment still occurs within its walls, the resolution takes place to observe how reporting rates remain low, as well as the way in which victims still not receive the appropriate help and how the culture of impunity persist within the institutional sphere ¹⁹⁶. It is precisely this tension between the formal image of the EP and the informal institutional norms and cultures that operates behind the scenes what makes it a particularly relevant case for this thesis, and the following section will develop the European institution in depth.

¹⁹² Blanke, H. J., & Mangiameli, S. (2013). *The Treaty on European Union (TEU)*. A commentary.

¹⁹³ Berthet, V., & Kantola, J. (2021). *Gender, violence, and political institutions: struggles over sexual harassment in the European Parliament*. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(1)

¹⁹⁴ Manne, Kate. (2017). *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁹⁵ Krook, M.L. (2020). *Violence against women in Politics*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁹⁶ European Parliament. (2023). *Resolution of 1st June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and the assessment of the #MeToo movement*. (2022/2138(INI)).

2.5 The European Parliament as a Crucial Case

Among European Institutions, the European Parliament has always distinguished itself as the most progressive one when addressing gender equality. Confirming this thesis, the Council and the Commission operate just through intergovernmental logics, while the EP is the only directly elected institution. In this sense, the European Parliament has positioned itself as the champion of fundamental rights and gender mainstreaming, producing concrete normative advances at European level.

The European Parliament (EP) is the only directly elected decision-making institution within the European Union. It is described by Kantola and Lombardo (2023) as the core point and critical pillar of democratic representation, house of objections, challenges and contestations. Between its duties, the European Parliaments adopts directives proposed by the European Commission and the Council of the EU, while, at the same time, acting as the budgetary authority and democratic scrutineer.

Following the last elections in 2024, the European Parliament includes today 720 Members (MEPs) representing each one of the twenty-seven Member States they are from. Then , MEPs are also organised into transnational political groups, based on their political affinities and ideologies, rather than their nationality.

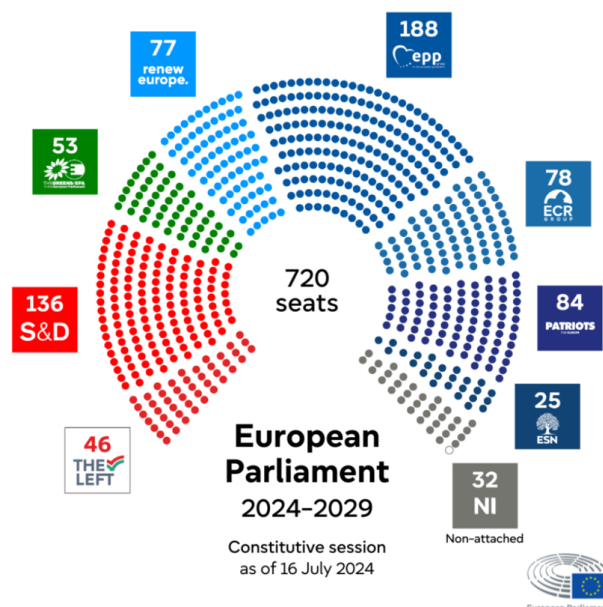


Figure 18 European Parliament Political Group's Organisation after 2024 Elections (European Parliament, 2024).¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/organisation-and-rules/organisation/political-groups>

In Figure 18, it is clear that the current composition of the EP reflects an increasingly fragmented landscape, powered by a growing number of Eurosceptic members and political groups belonging to the radical right populism. A diverse panorama that raises concerns regarding gender equality (Berthet, 2023). To better understand, *European Parliament's Political Groups in Turbulent Times*¹⁹⁸ specifically explains how these political groups operate independently from their broader European parties counterparts, but being internally organised around a leadership structure, also working through the executive body and being sustained by a secretariat, which coordinates the political agenda. However, the core point of the EP's legislative work cannot be seen in the full chamber, rather, EP functions within specialised Committees. Here, each member of political groups takes place and run for the heading role.

Right below, the Figure 19 illustrates the current distribution of MEPs across each committee:

Parliamentary committees

Committees and sub-committees	Number of MEPs	Name of chair	
Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)	88	Pascal CANFIN	Renew Europe
Subcommittee on Public Health (SANT)	30	Adam JARUBAS	EPP
Foreign Affairs (AFET)	79	David McALLISTER	EPP
Human Rights (DROI)	30	Udo BULLMANN	S&D
Security and Defence (SEDE)	30	Nathalie LOISEAU	Renew Europe
Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE)	78	Cristian-Silviu BUȘOI	EPP
Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE)	69	Juan Fernando LÓPEZ AGUILAR	S&D
Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON)	61	Irene TINAGLI	S&D
Tax Matters (FISC)	30	Paul TANG	S&D
Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL)	55	Dragos PÎSLARIU	Renew Europe
Transport and Tourism (TRAN)	49	Karima DELLI	Greens/EFA
Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI)	48	Norbert LINS	EPP
Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO)	45	Anna CAVAZZINI	Greens/EFA
International Trade (INTA)	43	Bernd LANGE	S&D
Regional Development (REGI)	43	Younous OMARJEE	The Left
Budgets (BUDG)	41	Johan VAN OVERTVELDT	ECR
Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM)	37	Robert BIEDROŃ	S&D
Petitions (PETI)	35	Dolors MONTSERRAT	EPP
Culture and Education (CULT)	31	Sabine VERHEYEN	EPP
Budgetary Control (CONT)	30	Monika HOHLMEIER	EPP
Constitutional Affairs (AFCO)	28	Salvatore DE MEO	EPP
Fisheries (PECH)	28	Pierre KARLESKIND	Renew Europe
Development (DEVE)	26	Tomas TOBÉ	EPP
Legal Affairs (JURI)	25	Adrián VÁZQUEZ LÁZARA	Renew Europe

Figure 19 Distribution of MEPs Within EP's Committees (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024).¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Ahrens, P., Elomäki, A., & Kantola, J. (2022). *European parliament's political groups in turbulent times*. Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁹⁹ <https://epthinktank.eu/2024/06/04/european-parliament-facts-and-figures/17-parliamentary-committees-2/>

As illustrated in the image published by EPRS, the distribution of Members across committees varies considerably in size and political weight. This internal differentiation of the EP is not neutral, as will be demonstrate in section 2.5.3, the distribution of men and women across various committees follows a gendered pattern that still reproduce masculine hierarchies of political importance. Some Committees are strongly dominated by men, this is the case of *Budgetary Control*, while within others, like *Culture and Education*, women are overrepresented. As Berthet note, the effects of segregating policy issues give the perception of some being men's affairs (high politics issues), and other being women's ones (secondary importance). In male dominated committees, women consistently struggle to be recognised as experts. Notably, even within a formally democratic institution like the European Parliament, attitudes toward gender equality within the institution are far from being uniform. Yet, a study conducted by Zacharenko (2019) and cited by Berthet (2023), reveals how, in 2019, almost 30% of MEPs were openly opposing to gender equality, not considering it as a supranational norm. An image that is useful to consider when investigating the formal commitment towards gender equality, a framework that will be investigated in the following sections.

Furthermore, as well illustrated by Berthet (2023), at the summit of the institutional hierarchy sits the EP's President, the figure that holds the last authority in important matters, including harassment. The President, together with the Vice-Presidents form the Bureau, the body responsible for high-level decisions. Since her re-election in 2024 elections, Roberta Metsola, a woman from Malta represents the EPP group at presidency, where she appointed seven women and seven men as Vice-Presidents. Metsola is currently the youngest President in EP's history, and the third women driving the European Parliament. However, this great nomination that evidence the advancement of gender equality, is not always mirrored by the European political groups' distribution. Here, among the eleven political groups, just four are led by women, among these, just the Greens and the Left maintain a gender-balanced leadership structures. To justify what said, in terms of descriptive representation, the gender composition of MEPs varies dramatically across Member States:

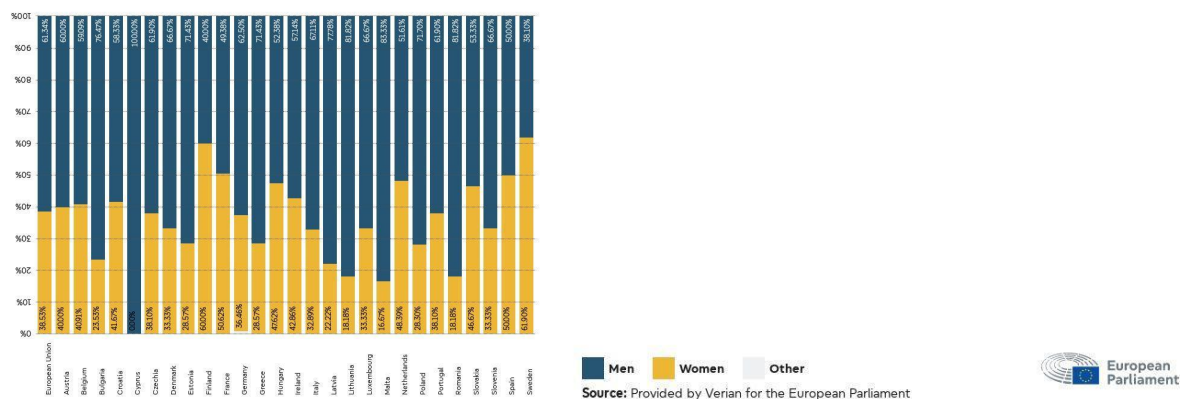


Figure 20 Gender Composition of MEPs Across Member States (European Parliament, 2024)²⁰⁰

As shown in Figure 20, the gender composition varies dramatically across Member States. Among a component of twenty-seven countries, nearly four of them reach 50% of female members. In countries like Sweden, France and Finland the number of elected women is higher than those of men, while countries like Cyprus that has no women in European offices (for the second consecutive elections) highly lower the rate. Overall, despite role models, in 2024 elections, the women's representation has fallen for the first time after decades of growth in the European Parliament's history, falling from 40.7% in 2019 to 38.6%. in 2024²⁰¹. Here below an intuitive scheme from the European Parliament's Facts and Figures, clearly show how the number of women working in the EP has fallen, after having reached its peak in 2019.

²⁰⁰ <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/mep-gender-balance/2024-2029/>

²⁰¹ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/data-talks/despite-hopes-progress-european-parliament-elections-led-decline-womens-representation>

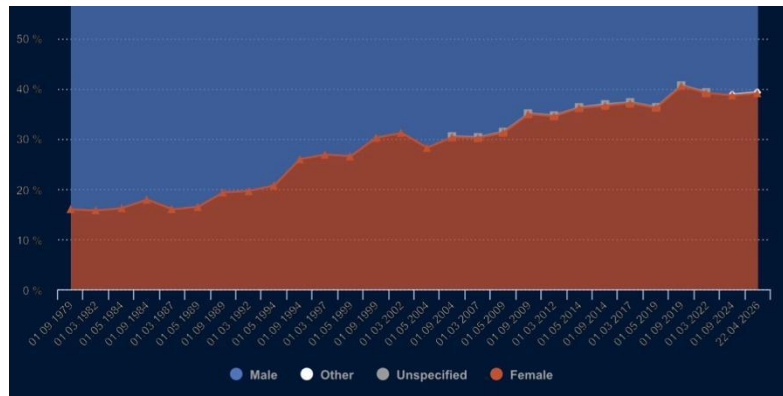


Figure 21 Evolution of Gender Representation in the EP, 1979-2026 (European Parliament, 2024, Facts and Figures)²⁰²

What differ the European Parliament from National ones is also its highly multicultural environment. The EP is today officially operating across twenty-four working languages. The reason is reflecting the linguistic diversity of its twenty-seven member states, and the decision respond to the commitment in ensuring that each EU citizen can access and understand the work of their elected officials. Despite this, the EP is also physically moving from Brussels to Strasbourg and back, the institution split its activities between the two cities of Belgium and France. While committee's work takes place in Brussels, monthly plenaries are held in Strasbourg. Moreover, as Berthet and Kantola (2021) evidence, multiculturalism is just one of the peculiar sides of PE, citing Corbett et al. (2016) they highlight:

<< political institutions are not “normal” workplaces, and elected representatives are not working under “normal” conditions. One example of this is parliamentary immunity and privilege>>²⁰³.

Yet, MEPs are embedded of an uneven level of protection, the parliamentary immunity that protect them and their accountability across the institution. Furthermore, a particular distinctive feature of the institution is the employment structure of Accredited Parliamentary Staff (APAs). Members of the staff are directly selected by the individual MEP, basing on mutual trust. A particular precarious situation, regarding that these figures lack from standard civil service protection, something that can turn them vulnerable when diving in risky

²⁰² <https://facts-and-figures.europarl.europa.eu>

²⁰³ Berthet, V., & Kantola, J. (2021). *Gender, violence, and political institutions: struggles over sexual harassment in the European Parliament*. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 28(1), p.147

situations. As Berthet and Kantola argues: <<*Vis-a-vis sexual harassment, these differentiated terms of employment result in quite different vulnerabilities.*>> ²⁰⁴.

In order to regulate this complex working environment, the European Parliament has progressively developed a formal framework composed by rules and codes of conduct. The aim of these latters, their effectiveness and their limitations will be then measured in the following sections.

2.5.1 European Parliament's Formal Commitment to Gender Equality

Gender Equality has always been a European Parliament's commitment. Yet, Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union ²⁰⁵ clearly identifies gender equality, between women and men, as the core value of the European Union. Furthermore, Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union ²⁰⁶ establishes gender mainstreaming as a binding principle: a policy that tries to implement the gender perspective into all stages of policies and decisions. In this sense, it is committed to the elimination of all kinds of inequalities within EU policies and activities. Over the decades, then, this formal commitment has directed legislative news, from the 1975 Equal Pay Directive to the Istanbul Convention ratification in 2023. Moreover, the European Commission has further institutionalised this commitment through a set of strategies with the aim to reduce gender gap in employment, representation and safety fields.

A key institutional actor that operates under the authority of the European Commission is the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). The Institute was established in 2007 and based in Vilnius and, whether it is not directly linkable to the EP, its work is highly relevant to the European Parliament's gender equality agenda. EIGE's duty is to collect, analyse and spread comparable data about gender equality across the Member States, with the aim to provide a general picture of equality levels across EU and to provide the empirical foundation on which the EU gender equality policies are built. Furthermore, EIGE is so central because it produces the annual Gender Equality Index. This latter, serve as tracking progresses across many domains, including work, money, knowledge, time, power... and to develop thematic reports about women's participation or gender-based violence as well. Fir this thesis, then,

²⁰⁴ *Ibidem*

²⁰⁵ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2012/art_2/oj

²⁰⁶ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2016/art_8/oj/eng

EIGE stands also as particularly relevant thanks to its documenting about women's representation evolution within the EP ²⁰⁷.

It is right within this EU framework that the European Parliament has historically reached the nomination as a vanguard for gender equality in supranational environments. The institution is called as devoted to formally promoting human rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and equality between genders. However, this evaluation has not always reflected the reality, yet, its early formal commitment has frequently been proved as insufficient in the practice.

Among the first institutional efforts, in 2008 the Parliament adopted guidelines about the use of gender neutral language and introduced punishment for MEPs and staff acting and behaving in inappropriate ways, with the Rules of Procedure, published in both, 2006 and in 2017 (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). As scholars like Berthet and Kantola (2021) particularly observe, Rule 11 specifically prohibited defamatory, racist and xenophobic language and activities. Despite this, these regulations ever failed to address specifically to sexual harassment, leaving undefined spaces for inactions and formality, while detailed penalties addressing inappropriate conduct and behaviors have always been proved as controversial and rarely translated into practice.

However, the first important institutional driver towards gender equality in EP has been the *Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality*, better known as FEMM Committee. FEMM was established in 1984, introduced by Kantola and Lombardo (2023) as emerging from its basis of earlier specific committees in the late seventies. FEMM Committee is introduced as the core of the EP's feminist governance, an entity responsible for the implementation of gender mainstreaming across many policies and presented as the actor issuing opinions on legislative proposals, producing its own reports and always importing feminist's point of view. Issues at stake in FEMM's attention vary, as Berthet (2023) notes, from equal pay to parental leave, pension and gender-based violence as well, referring to the committee as the key agenda setter of gender equality issues that represent the historical EP's feminist alliance. Yet, FEMM's impact was amplified by the ability of its members to network across other committees, trying to force and implement a gender perspective across every policy, as reported by scholars:

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<https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/eu-gender-based-violence-survey-evidence-policy-and-practice>

<< *FEMM issues opinions and statements on legislative proposals and puts forward own-initiative reports. Its impact is increased by the ways in which its members have been able to network across committees and pressure other committees to integrate gender perspectives in their work* (Ahrens, 2016: 786–90). >>²⁰⁸

However, FEMM also operates under certain structural constraints that limit its institutional weight. Unlike others, it is perceived as a weaker committee. FEMM's membership is voluntary based, which suggests that inscription is taken outside of the formal institutional commitment. For that reason, FEMM obtained the status of the '*neutralised committee*'

²⁰⁹Among committees, FEMM is not taken into account as an important and prior one, even though it represents the historical EP's feminist alliance. Berthet (2023) documents this clearly, significant legislative files are allocated to FEMM, furthermore, it is also found to be rarely included in trilogues: the European inter-institutional negotiations between Parliament, Council and Commission, where important decisions are taken. Despite this, it is not fair to consider the Committee as not producing. Rather, many progressive reports have been passed within FEMM, thanks to its gender equality commitment. However, they do not always secure a majority in the full plenary due to the greater weight carried by the EPP (European People's Party) group. This latter, is the biggest political group inside EP, but highly divided in matters of gender equality ²¹⁰. As demonstrated in Figure 19, among MEPs taking part in Committees, there is not the same interest for all the subjects. As noted, FEMM conserve nearly 40 members, far from being popular. Notably, the structural marginalisation of FEMM has been further compounded by a significant political shift, following the 2024 elections. As Berthet (2023) documents, the paradoxical integration of anti-gender actors and the far-right inside the Committee, due to its voluntary membership, has fundamentally altered its internal balance. This means that certain current members are thought to be actively opposing, or tend to resist, to progress in gender equality and intersectionality. Yet, this is something that raise serious concerns about the real capacity of the committee to advance its agenda.

Then, in April 14th 2014, the European Parliament established the *Anti-Harassment Committee*, an attempt to address internal workplace dynamic, by granting its jurisdiction

²⁰⁸ Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2023). *The European Parliament as a gender equality actor: A contradictory forerunner*. In *Handbook of feminist governance* p.300. Edward Elgar Publishing.

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*

²¹⁰ Warasin, M., Kantola, J., Rolandsen Agustín, L., & Coughlan, C. (2019) *Politicisation of Gender Equality in the European Parliament: Cohesion and Inter-Group Coalitions in Plenary and Committees*. In Petra Ahrens and Lise Rolandsen Agustín (eds), *Gendering the European Parliament: Structures, Policies, and Practices*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 141–58.

over psychological and sexual harassment perpetrated by MEPs ²¹¹. According to its foundational rules, the Committee was composed by five members, designated by the President, and should include at least one expert in equal opportunities. Apparently the mechanisms felt strong, as it was supposed to guarantee confidentiality, a clear path of procedures and the direct forward of findings to the EP's President, who had the final decision authority. Despite the formal architecture, the mechanisms proved to be totally ineffective in practice, as the new outcoming MeToo Movement, in 2019 accused the committee by not having investigated a single case of sexual harassment either (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). MeTooEP, launched in 2018, was a grassroots campaign established by EP workers, such as APAs, trainees and policy advisors that channelled the chance of the global movement #MeToo to demand institutional protection and accountability for sexual harassment. As scholars (Berthet and Kantola, 2021) explain, the gap between formal rules and their application was heavy. Despite a detailed procedure existing in paper, no victims reported, out of fear of retaliation. But the reason was clear: the Committee's composition heavily relied on elected politicians judging their colleagues. Berthet explains:

<< MeTooEP criticized the Anti-harassment Committee's composition because most of its members were MEPs. Therefore, reporting an abusive MEP in front of other MEPs was described by the campaign as a barrier for victims. >>²¹²

Moreover, the mere existence of these formal procedures was frequently instrumentalised by the institution through what Berthet and Kantola (2021) describe as *Good Institution* discourse. A discourse, is a rhetorical strategy, a framework. In this specific case, the discourse strategy was articulated primary by conservative MEPs and high institutional figures, whose constructed the EP as a virtuous and the best-equipped institution to combat harassment. Yet, rather than acknowledging the existence of the problem and the need for structural change, the discourse emphasised the already existing internal mechanisms, presenting the Anti-Harassment Committee as the evidence of institutional competence in matter of VAWIP, while delegitimizing MeTooEP's calls for action. In this way, the formal

²¹¹ European Parliament (2014). *Bureau Decision of 14th April 2014: Internal rules on harassment and its preventions at the work*

²¹² Berthet, V., (2022). *Mobilization Against Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament: The MeTooEP campaign*. European Journal of Women's Studies. 29(2). p.340

mechanism served to preserve EP's reputation as a champion of democracy and gender equality, while demonstrating that the problem was already been addressed.

Notably, despite advancements, the European Parliament still remained linked to structural limitations. The formal equality measures taken, failed to destroy the precarious employment conditions of APAs, who remained totally dependend from MEPs' decisions and trust. At the same time, parliamentary immunity and freedom that MEPs have frequently let them avoid officials mandatory training and provide them with the right to not being sanctioned (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). However, what played a great role against formal harassment frameworks still remain party culture, discipline and the hegemonic male dominance, their presence demonstrate how formal policies are not enough to dismantle informal power structures. These latters need to change in order to establish a concrete gender equality driven institution.

In conclusions, thanks to MeTooEP, some concrete changes has been implemented. For example, for the first time in 2024, MEPs were required to sign a Declaration committed to the Code of Appropriate Behavior at the beginning of their mandate ²¹³. Furthermore, << *several staff members of political groups and MEPs confirmed the creation of some new rules in political groups.* >>²¹⁴ establishing internal mechanisms anti-harassment, among them: the Greens introducing a mandatory training while Socialist and the Left creating a *confidential counsellor* system, where to report safely. However, scholarly evaluations and the Parliament's June 2023 Resolution itself, conclude that these measures remain insufficient to produce a change (European Parliament, 2023) and the structural problem persist. Yet, victims still do not receive adequate support as they should, while perpetrators' penalties are often weak. What remains structurally unresolved is the culture of impunity, a challenge that points beyond institutional reform, toward the informal norms and power dynamics that will be examined in the following section.

²¹³ European Parliament. (2023). Resolution of 1st June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and the assessment of the #MeToo movement. (2022/2138(INI)).

²¹⁴ Berthet, V., & Kantola, J. (2021). Gender, violence, and political institutions: struggles over sexual harassment in the European Parliament. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(1), p.161

2.5.2 *Behind the Image, Informal Norms and Institutional Resistance*

The formal measures examined above, despite their limited effectiveness, represent just the visible surface of a deeper institutional problem. As theorised in section 2.3, Feminist Institutionalism is a key to understand how political institutions reproduce gendered inequalities through formal and informal norms and through that institutional culture that rules the political life. Precisely, it is that informal reality that still shape structural resistance to gender equality.

Despite the formal commitment, the persistence of informal masculine norms within the EP still shapes a structurally hostile environment for women. Kantola and Lombardo (2023) provide a complete framework to understand daily parliamentary informal norms that work every day rewarding suitable figures. By noting:

<< Daily informal norms of parliamentary work tend to reward MEPs without care responsibilities, who tend to be men, or political performances associated with hegemonic masculinity, while generating resistance to consideration of women MEPs as legitimate 'insiders'. >>²¹⁵

They document informal norms as rewarding MEPs' full-time occupation, something that do not converge with care responsibilities, resulting in a lack of work-life balance. But also, late-hours meeting and aggressive style of speaking that require bodily performances and debating styles, associated with hegemonic masculinity. Altogether, these elements generate an atmosphere that communicates to women they are not in their place (Kantola and Lombardo, 2023). This exclusionary culture is then further reinforced by the normalisation of late-night working hours and the absence of a balance between the private life and the public one, practices that structurally privilege men over women²¹⁶. The everyday reality of this informal institutional culture is well captured in IPU/PACE (2016) documentation among women parliamentarian, when one said: *<< If a woman speaks loudly in parliament she is 'shushed' with a finger to the lips, as one does with children. That never happens when a man speaks loudly. >>²¹⁷*. A dynamic that is acknowledged also by male MEPs, as highlighted by

²¹⁵ Kantola, J., & Lombardo, E. (2023). *The European Parliament as a gender equality actor: A contradictory forerunner*. In: Handbook of feminist governance (pp. 299-310). Edward Elgar Publishing p.308

²¹⁶ Erikson, Josefine and Cecilia Josefsson (2022) *The Parliament as a Gendered Workplace: How to Research Legislators* (UN)Equal Opportunities to Represent', *Parliamentary Affairs* 75(1): 20–38. <http://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa049>.

²¹⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians*. p. 4

Ahrens et al. when citing S&D's male MEP and Staff member reporting about gender equality levels within EP's political groups:

*<< I think the levels of awareness of what is appropriate and acceptable are very, very low. It's still at the end of the day dominated by middle-aged men with traditional male attitudes and behaviours, and there's no significant countervailing force. (MEP) >>*²¹⁸

And again, a male member of the staff in S&D group, as well noted how gendered stereotypes persist in the everyday actions, by claiming that, women's appearance is always questioned and commented while men's is not. And that: *<< I'm not saying there's abuse or anything like that, but it's the stereotypes. ... Even they believe that they are not being sexist or anything. They are at the end of the day. >>*²¹⁹. Taken together, these testimonies create a consistent frame: the European Parliament's informal culture systematically privileges masculine attitudes through everyday practices and unspoken expectation.

Furthermore, this deeply intertwined masculine culture, does not just reflect the vertical segregation, as explained in previous chapter, rather, it translates also into a rigid gendered segregation of parliamentary committees, *horizontal segregation*. As Kantola and Lombardo (2023) document, the distribution of MEPs across various committees mirror those informal norms. Yet, it is pretty clear that gender marks the assign of prestigious committees, like Finance and Economy, to men, while less valued ones, like FEMM, are reserved for women²²⁰. moreover, Berthet (2023) shows how, in policy areas coded as *high policy*, whose involve economic governance or budgetary control, the domination is almost entirely male dominated. Here, the segregatory policy issues gives the perception of some policies being men's affairs, in those spaces, women struggle to be seen as experts. Notably, committees coded as 'feminine', as involving Culture, Education and Rights are disproportionately representing women, because of secondary importance.

²¹⁸ Ahrens, P., Elomäki, A., & Kantola, J. (2022). *European parliament's political groups in turbulent times*. Palgrave Macmillan. p.231

²¹⁹ *Ibidem*

²²⁰ Erikson, Josefina and Tània Verge (2022) *Gender, Power and Privilege in the Parliamentary Workplace*, Parliamentary Affairs 75(1): 1–19

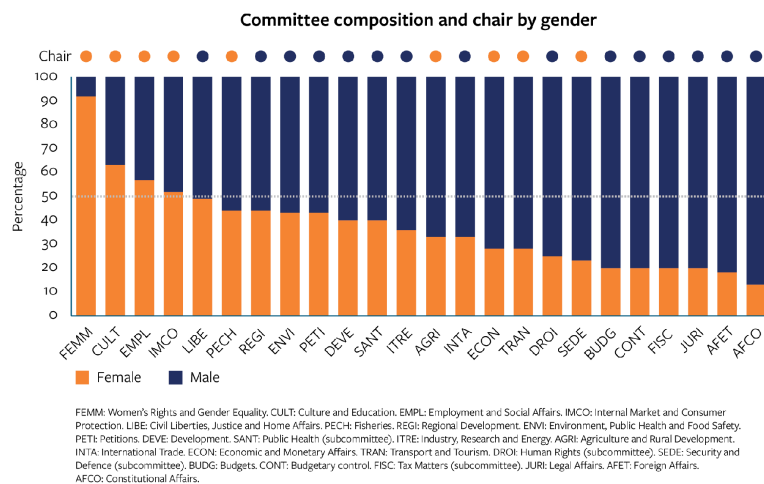


Figure 22 Committee Composition and Women Representation (ODI Global, 2024) ²²¹

As illustrated in Figure 20, the gendered distribution described above is clearly visible across committees' population. Women actually hold the majority of chairs in four committees: *Women's Rights and Gender Equality* (more than 90%), *Culture and Education* (nearly 60%), *Employment and Social Affairs* (55%) and *Internal Market and Consumer Protection* (52%).

However, it is also important to note that, this horizontal segregation is often internalised and reproduced by female MEPs as well. A statement reported by Ahrens et al. (2022) shows how hegemonic gender norms and discourses become normal within institutional framework: by claiming about the visual difference between men and women representation inside specific committees such as Industry, Research and Energy, a female ALDE (Liberals and Democrats for Europe) MEP argues about women's attitudes towards social issues and human rights policies.

<< this is because of the will of the members... It's not because of the group but because it is how women are: more interested in social issues, human rights issues. And they want to become members of these committees. And men are more interested in technology and so on. (ALDE MEP F 210219)>>

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²²¹ <https://odi.org/en/insights/women-in-the-european-parliament-signs-of-gender-equality-regression/>

²²² Ahrens, P., Elomäki, A., & Kantola, J. (2022). *European parliament's political groups in turbulent times*. Palgrave Macmillan. p.232

When gendered hierarchies become so deeply embedded, even those who are actually disadvantaged start perceiving they are not, as it is were normal to be *less*. This normalisation of gendered hierarchies is further blurred by a logic of individual exceptionalism of individual women in prominent position, such as EP President Roberta Metsola. This is the tendency to name the presence of specific women in prominent positions as evidencing that structural inequalities have been overcome. As documented by Ahrens et al. (2022) the present dynamic is often visible in conservative political groups, here, women advancement are frequently deployed to go against sexism accuses or to justify the absence of gender equality measures ²²³. The election of Roberta Metsola as EP President, risks being read as of what Pitkin (1967) call *symbolic representation*, a single high profile reaching represent the idea of an achieved gender equality, distorting the attention from structural problems that still shape the everyday experience. Then, it is against this backdrop of normalised and self exclusion that the emergence of MeTooEP must be analysed.

Trying to respond to these intertwined informal hierarchies, MeTooEP campaign emerged as a grassroots mobilisation within the EP's culture. In order to prevent and combat sexual harassment inside the EP, Berthet and Kantola (2021) focused on discourses about sexual harassment within the institution, trying to develop different solutions related to different framing. MeTooEP, in this sense, is thought to have adopted the so called *Harassed Workers Discourse*, foregrounding the position of the worker, rather than the victim. In doing so, scholars attributed to them a combative tone of voice, using an activist emphasis with the aim to highlight the extreme power imbalances between MEPs and staff members. Presenting themselves as *workers* prevented to be addressed in a gendered way and empowered them, but also it gave a clear frame about who the campaign was referred to: EP's workers, not just MEPs. This insider advantage then, allowed them to develop both internal and external strategies: attaching flyers on walls, posting on online blog and taking advantage from their professional networks to formalise their message.

However, despite the unprecedented visibility gained by MeTooEP, the European Parliament's informal structures gave proof of its resilience, resisting to change. In this sense, both, the EP Bureau and Secretariat limited the campaign. As Berthet (2021) report, citing Ahrens (2018), this resistance did not even try to combat the change, rather, it embodied just the institutional inertia. As one activist noted, reported by Berthet : << *Even if there is a*

²²³ Ahrens, P., Elomäki, A., & Kantola, J. (2022). *European parliament's political groups in turbulent times*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Resolution like the one that we are basing our ght on, it's only the Bureau that takes the decision and that tells the administration what to change... if there is just a positive vote on some Resolution that doesn't change anything... that is really an experience from this movement. (D&S staff 2:25) >>²²⁴ as said, even a positive parliamentary resolution meant little in practice.

Furthermore, the active resistance took concrete form when one of the EP Vice-Presidents, belonging to EPP, contacted the organizers of a MeTooEP speaking event to cancel the interventions, accusing speakers to spread a false and denigratory image of the Parliament (Berthet and Kantola, 2021). Ultimately, as Berthet and Kantola (2021) conclude, the gap between MeTooEP's ambitions and the current institutional response was significant. What should have been an institutional commitment, became an individual problem, especially for young women in charge. This outcome highlights what the theoretical framework of this thesis argues. Formal norms are not enough to dismantle the power structure that rules the institution, in that way, a substantive change is required towards a cultural transformation. An alteration that today remains still far.

2.5.3 Why the European Parliament Matters for This Thesis

The European Parliament is an exceptionally rich case study for investigating VAWIP. Its value as a case study lies in what scholars describe as its *double identity*. Yet, the EP introduces itself as a progressive norm setter, the most democratic institution with high representation of women, while also exposing itself as a gendered workplace (Berthet and Kantola, 2021; Kantola and Lombardo, 2023, Berthet, 2023). Differing from national Parliaments, the EP comprises MEPs from twenty-seven different countries, with different languages, cultures and internal dynamics. Everything that affects how gender-based violence is experienced and seen. What is peculiar about the EP is that it embodies a profound paradox, it is highly celebrated as the pioneer of gender equality, thanks to the FEMM Committee and many formal policies, while covering blurred gender-based hostility and welcoming a complex galaxy of anti-gender actors. Right, this gap between a narrow and fair public image promoting the *good institution* discourse, and the lived reality of informal norms and institutional inertia, makes the EP particularly interesting to observe this is why this thesis

²²⁴ Berthet, V., (2022). *Mobilization Against Sexual Harassment in the European Parliament: The MeTooEP campaign*. European Journal of Women's Studies. 29(2). p.341

focus on the EP, trying to capture how unwritten and informal rules can systematically subvert official normative frameworks.

By selecting the European Parliament as the empirical focus of this thesis, the analysis in the chapter 4 will be drawn upon in-depth interviews with Italian female MEPs, along with a documentary analysis of key institutional documents. In that way, the empirical research will investigate the implementation gap identified in the theoretical framework of chapter 2. Examining how the informal dynamics that have been theorised really manifest in concrete political experiences of female MEPs.

Furthermore, the EP also offers wide contribution to scholars' debate about VAWIP. This thesis will demonstrate that formal equality norms and high levels representation of women in politics cannot fix the gender problem. Yet, what is needed is a transformation of those informal norms and power structures that affect politics since its origins. Additionally, as the institution faces growing ideological polarisation and the ever increasing number of anti-gender actors within its spaces, it will function as a mirror of gender equality resistance within democracy (Berthet, 2023). Investigating how the transnational institution deals with these struggles, offers a chance to contribute to broader debates, well beyond the European context.

This chapter has built the theoretical framework where to investigate VAWIP. It began with establishing why gender matters in political institution, it drew on feminist theory to understand how informal masculine norms shape women's political experiences, even before their entrance in politics. Then, it depicted forms, actors and contexts of VAWIP, showing that violence cannot be understood as a singular incident but as a continuum of different manifestations. This chapter then examined VAWIP as a structural phenomenon, applying Galtung's triangle of violence, and showing how Krook and Restrepo Sanin adapted this tool with a gendered vision to demonstrate that violence is not random, rather, it is embedded in patriarchal foundations of political institutions. Later, Feminist Institutionalism provided lenses to better understand this connection, highlighting how formal measures committed to fix gender equality, are always absorbed into those informal norms that they were committed to dismantle. In this sense, demonstrating that institutional reforms, alone, are insufficient. This chapter also assessed institutional responses to VAWIP, revealing a persistent gap between formal recognition and useful implementation. Furthermore, introducing the MeTooEP, the campaign whose emergence point this thesis' chronological landscape, it

shows how concrete reforms have been produced by the movement, even if a culture of impunity still remain largely unaddressed.

Finally, the chapter establish the European parliament as the case study and empirical focus of this research. As will be later confirmed, the paradoxical identity of the institution: being the champion of gender equality and, at the same time, a gendered workplace, makes it a perfect case for this investigation. The Chapter 3 will outline the methodology occurred to explain how the empitical investigation was designet to capture the gap between what the institution is committed to, and what female MEPs experience.

3. Methodology

Chapter 2 has offered a comprehensive overview of what VAWIP is: a structural and systemic phenomenon. Violence Against Women in Politics is found to be embedded into informal culture and power dynamics almost everywhere, even in high-developed countries where it is impossible to imagine. However, what is more astonishing emerges from the acknowledgment of the gap between formal equality measures and the concrete reality, something that is hard to dismantle. The reason is that theory, alone, cannot really capture every shadow of a phenomenon, especially if the dynamic is lived and understood just by a portion of society. In order to close this gap, this chapter will outline the methodological choices that drove this research.

The aim of this thesis is to understand how does VAWIP operate within the European Parliament, through which mechanisms, and how do MEPs' political agency and participation are affected. In general, this central question is demanding for an approach that highlights lived experiences, trying to capture the complexity of a such charged topic. The main RQ asks for how and through which mechanisms Violence is actually affecting female MEPs, without looking for a quantitative number of affected politicians. Following this reasoning, this thesis adopts a qualitative methodology that poses its basis upon a case study: the European Parliament. Rather than a quantitative method, the qualitative one allows for understand how violence manifests and what it produces inside victims, and this is the only method that let us investigate this sphere, by blending multiple sources. The scope, then, is to differentiate from scholars that focus on measuring the prevalence of VAWIP within institutions, including the EP, trying to really understand forms and consequences of violence reproduction. Furthermore, this thesis investigates perceptions of those MEPs that are affected by VAWIP everyday, within the EP: *the champion of gender equality*.

The empirical analysis is driven by two complementary qualitative methods: some Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews with Italian female MEPs and the Document Analysis of key institutional texts, produced between 2018 and 2026. Together, these method will allow for a triangulated examination, trying to provide an answer to research questions. The qualitative analysis and the complementarity of these two methods point to capture both: the institutional narrative regulated by norms and regulations, and the lived reality, provided by who works inside the institution.

This chapter describes and justifies the selections for each methodological choice. It begins with the explanation for the research design and the widely clarification of the sub-research questions, then, it will describe the document analysis: how the corpus has been selected and the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of texts. It is followed by a discussion upon the interview method, explaining participant's profilation, the strategy used and the structure of the interview questions. Furthermore, the chapter will also address how data from both methodological sources have been coded and analysed, concluding with the ethical considerations that shaped the research, again with its limits.

3.1 Research Design and Research Questions

This thesis aims to understand how Violence Against Women in Politics is experienced and perceived by female Members of the European Parliament. In conducting this research, this thesis tries to understand the social reality of MEPs, through their experiences and the consequent meaning they give to certain dynamics. In doing so, the present research also aligns with a broader critical perspective: the one that question whether, the taken for granted, gender-equal position of the European Parliament is still reproducing gendered hierarchies and masculine power relation within its walls. In particular, the investigation focuses on the European Parliament's formal commitment to gender equality in the following year, after the MeTooEP campaign. Focusing on the period following the MeTooEP campaign, emerging at the end of 2017, means taking into account the timespan from 2018 to 2026. The aim is to investigate whether the formal reforms introduced after the campaign development have produced meaningful changes in the everyday experiences of female MEPs. Then, in general, questioning whether the institution is right taking its gender-equality award for granted or if its image continue to blur a more complex reality.

The qualitative methodology reveals to be the most appropriate and suitable choice to develop this research. In this sense, qualitative research points to the understanding of a social phenomenon from the perspective of people in the first line, investigating experience and meanings. It differ from quantitative research by the fact that, this latter's aim is to quantify with numbers, working with large samples. In contrary, qualitative research gives space to depth. Yet, it is suitable for research question answering "why" and "how", along with specific dynamics that are not possible to catch with numbers.

Creswell and Poth (2018) note as the qualitative inquiry is the most appropriate when seeking to understand a problem from multiple perspectives. In this way, the meaning can emerge clearly from data with no need for already-made categories ²²⁵. The questions driving this research are precisely asking for *how* and *why*, these do not ask about how many female MEPs are affected from VAWIP within the institution, rather, they question *how* does VAWIP operates, *which* forms does it takes and *which* are consequences the produced in victims. In this sense, a qualitative approach is justified, because numbers alone cannot provide a useful lens. Within the qualitative approach, then, this thesis adopts a case study approach: it focuses on the European Parliament. Yin (2018), in his *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* ²²⁶ provide knowledge regarding the correct conducting case-study research. Depicting it as particularly appropriate when investigating complex phenomenon. In this sense, case studies help contextualising the understanding, building a rich evidence of the questioned dynamic. The present research takes the EP as *the* case: the European Parliament suffer from a heavy paradox. Given that, it shows formal commitment towards gender-equality, but the reality reveals that it still reproduces the exclusion and hostility dynamics that it denounced.

The empirical inquiry has been guided by the following Research Questions:

Main RQ: How does Violence Against Women in Politics operate within the European Parliament, and through which mechanisms does it shape the political agency and political participation of female Members of the European Parliament?

Subordinate RQ1: What forms of VAWIP do female MEPs experience? And how does the online dimension intersect with the institutional context?

Subordinate RQ2: How do VAWIP shape female MEPs' political behavior, visibility and political engagement within the institution?

Subordinate RQ3: How do institutional responses and reporting mechanisms affect both, the persistence of VAWIP and women's trust, in institutional protection?

These are the questions that shape the investigation. Developing from the identification of forms of violence targeting MEPs to their consequences on political behavior, questioning then the institutional responses. In this sense, the two empirical methods implied, the

²²⁵ Creswell, J. W., Poth, C. N. (2018) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: choosing among five approaches*. Sage.

²²⁶ Yin, R. K., (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. (6th ed.)

document analysis and the semi-structured in-depth interviews, are complementary to address this phenomenon from any corner. In this way, their application is justified, and these will be further examined in the following sections.

3.2 Document Analysis

Assuming that a qualitative approach is the most useful methodology to the aim of this research, in addition to the data taken from semi-structured in-depth interviews, this thesis develops on the analysis of key institutional documents, each produced between 2018 and 2026. Document analysis, in this sense, allows for examining the institutional narrative about the topic: VAWIP. In general, it describes how the European Parliament and other relevant international bodies have formally defined and recognised Violence Against Women in Politics, and how do they answered to it. These two methods this research is aimed to use will then allow for a triangulated examination. By setting the institutional discourse near to the lived experiences of female Italian MEPs, this thesis will be able to investigate the gap between the EP's formal commitment to gender equality and the everyday reality.

The corpus chosen for the analysis consists of seven documents. The selection criteria were three:

First, a direct relevance to the European Parliament as an institution. In this sense, just documents containing an explicit address to gender-based violence or harassment within parliamentary or EU institutional contexts were chosen.

Second, documents should have a temporal relevance for the thesis. The analytical frame of this research convenes in the post MeTooEP period, from 2018 to 2026. Yet, this period is not random as MeTooEP marked the first significant moment of the institution self-questioning about these issues. In this sense, this is the right starting point to assess whether formal reforms have produced meaningful changes in practice.

Third, they need also institutional diversity. By including documents produced by different actors at different levels, the corpus allows to capture the full institutional landscape of responses to the problem.

Therefore, several documents have been considered, among these, the seven documents which have been selected are:

The IPU/PACE joint study *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe* (2018) ²²⁷. This source, produced in October 2018 from a close collaboration between the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, acts as the empirical baseline of the corpus. In this sense, it represents the first attempt to map the extent of sexism, harassment and VAW within Parliaments across EU. This study gives to this research a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon right before the MeTooEP succeeding, finding high levels of psychological violence, online harassment, physical threats and sexual violence targeting female politicians and staff, occurring within European Institutional contexts. Moreover, the text depicts younger and active on gender equality issues MPs as being disproportionately targeted by VAWIP, violating their fundamental rights and democratic participation. Moreover, this text is also essential as it captures underreporting mechanisms and existing institutional responses, founding these latter as not enough. In this sense, the IPU/PACE study serves many purposes for this thesis: it stands as the starting point of the analytical time-frame, it captures the institutional situation right before MeTooEP reforms were introduced and it creates an essential frame along with the *EPRS briefing* ²²⁸ by Zamfir (2025). The comparison between these two documents, seven years apart, allow for an assessment of what has changed formally and what has not in the practice.

Second, the *Amendments to the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure concerning transparency, integrity, accountability and anti-corruption*, also known as the *Corbett Report* ²²⁹, a text formally adopted by the European Parliament in 2019. It represents the first concrete institutional response to the MeTooEP campaign and the most significant reform of EP's internal conduct in recent years. It takes its name from Richard Corbett, a British MEP who prepared this report with the Committee on Constitutional Affairs. The report introduced many amendments to be added to the Rules of Procedure, among these, the most relevant paragraph for this thesis is found to be the third of Rule 11 (later, in 2024 version, renumbered as Rule 10). That section explicitly prohibits MEPs from provoking any form of psychological violence or sexual harassment, then claiming about the impossibility to hold office positions again, whether not having signed the declaration linked to the Code of

²²⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*.

²²⁸ Zamfir, I., 2024. Violence against Women Active in Politics in the EU: A Serious Obstacle to Political Participation. *European Parliamentary Research Service*, February.

²²⁹ European Parliament. (2019). *Amendments to Parliament's Rules of Procedures*. (P8_TA(2019)0046). January 31, 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0046_EN.html

Appropriate Behaviour. In this sense, the Corbett report behaves as the pivotal document of institutional reform for this research, as it is the exact moment when the European Parliament state a formal acknowledgement of the phenomenon. From this point, the before internally unaddressed harassment became sanctionable. Then, the choice to analyse this report is driven by the chance to understand what changed and what not, in other words, to find that implementation gap that is driving this research, reading and studying its amendments.

Then, the third document chosen for this research conduct is the Rules of Procedure and Code of Appropriate Behaviour, adopted in 2019 ²³⁰. The present text constitutes the normative framework emerging directly from the Corbett Report reforms. While this latter represents the political decision to change the rules, the Rules of Procedures and the Code are the rules themselves. In general, this passage represents the translation from the political will to change to the concrete instrument. Here, Rule 10 introduces the needed formal prohibition of psychological and sexual harassment asked by the Report (2019). Notably, it also establish some explicit conduct standards that must be followed by all Members. These will be found in the Annex II of the Rules of Procedures (2019): the Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2019). It contains specific behavioural expectations that MEPs are required to follow, and to which they are expected to be committed to, by signature. This document will be analysed together with the Rules of procedure and Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2024), the most recent version of the same normative that will be later explained, as well as their usefulness for this thesis. However, in general this 2019 version will serve as the basis to assess what really changed right after the MeTooEP.

Then, the FEMM Committee and EPRS (2021) combines two complementary documents upon gender-based cyberviolence. These two documents are the *European Added Value Assessment* by EPRS ²³¹ and the *European Parliament Resolution of 14 December 2021 on combating gender-based violence: cyberviolence* adopted by the European Parliament in 2021 ²³². The former is a technical study commissioned with the aim to evaluate the EU-level legislation and intervention about cyberviolence. Rather, the 2021 Resolution translates conclusions about that study into an official institutional position.

²³⁰ European Parliament, (2019). *Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament*. 9th parliamentary term, December 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-9-2019-07-02_EN.html

²³¹ European Parliamentary research service. (2021). *Combating gender-based violence: Cyber violence. European added value assessment*. (EPRS_STU(2021)662621). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU\(2021\)662621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU(2021)662621_EN.pdf)

²³² European Parliament. (2021) *European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on combating gender-based violence: cyberviolence (2020/2035(INL))*. (P9_TA(2021)0489). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0489_EN.html

The EPRS' Assessment claim that gender-based cyberviolence is a wide phenomenon that cannot be described as limited of Member States, because these cannot address this problem alone. Arriving to this conclusion, the study analyse the fragmentation of existing national regulations, estimating also that the existing costs of violence are substantial. As such, they propose eight policy options to develop a coordinated European intervention, from softer measures to harder ones. Consequently, the 2021 Resolution will build on these basis. By explicitly recognising cyberviolence and its nature, by excessively targeting women, the formal text also documents the silencing effect produced of women's participation. Yet, these combined documents are highly relevant for this research as they provide detailed institutional treatment about the online dimension of VAWIP, and they also illustrate a pivotal stage in institutional path: the moment when a critical phenomenon moves from being recognised as a problem, toward the moment when it is actively framed as a concern needing legislation. In this sense, those texts are highly valuable given the highly referring to cyberviolence by Italian MEPs interviewed and the importance of implementation gap issue for this thesis.

The sixth document is the *Resolution of June 1st 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and MeToo evaluation* ²³³. This text represents the most significant act of the institutional self-assessment in the document corpus. Formally, it was adopted five years after the MeTooEP campaign, as being the European Parliament's self-evaluation about the progresses made since that moment when, for the first time, the scale of harassment occurring inside the institutions has been shown. Yet, the 2023 Resolution is highly notable for its conclusions: it explicitly acknowledges that << *European Parliament is unfortunately not a safe workplace* >> ²³⁴. Sustaining this thesis, it further claim that cases of sexual and psychological harassment continue to occur, while reporting rates still lower. Moreover, it documents a list of multiple 'failures' about the institutional structure, as the one month suspension as the maximum sanction for harassment acts or even the incomplete mandatory training. What makes this text even more efficient for the purpose of this research is the fact that it frames harassment not as individual negative acts, rather, as a systemic problem that is deeply rooted into gendered power structures. It also calls for stronger sanctions, trainings and a renewed advisory committee, thought to be more transparent than it actually was. Notably, for this

²³³ European Parliament. (2023). *European Parliament resolution of 1 June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and MeToo evaluation*. (2022/2138(INI)). P9_TA(2023)0217, *Official Journal of the European Union*. (C/2023/1224), 21 December 2023. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C_202301224

²³⁴ European Parliament. (2023). *European Parliament resolution of 1 June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and MeToo evaluation*. p. 5/11

thesis, this document rely in a central position among others. This text embody the moment when institutions formally admits that their formal commitment did not translate into meaningful changes, in this sense this is the first source investigating the implementation gap issues.

The Rules of Procedure and Code of Appropriate Behaviour ²³⁵ is the most recent version of the EP's internal normative framework. It has been updated at the beginning of the 10th legislative term, following 2024 elections. It mirrors its 2019 predecessor but it stands reflecting five years of institutional evolution, and a new parliamentary composition. The matter for this thesis is clear, it serves as the end point of the normative analysis by capturing the EP's internal governance at the moment when interviewed MEP's were introduced in their term. By reading it along with its 2019 version, it allows for assess whether their strengthened changed, as well as its language as been hardened or not. Particular attention will be delivered to the distinction between binding and aspirational language, to understand what the institution formally prohibits and what it encourages.

Lastly, the EPRS briefing ²³⁶ by Zamfir (2025), updating the earlier version of February 2024, it constitutes the most recent update available within the chosen corpus. The document provide a comprehensive overview of the VAWIP level across EU Member States and EU Institutions.

Notably, it analyses VAWIP as convergent point between political violence and the GBV, targeting women across all level of political engagement. Drawing upon national and European surveys across EU, it address psychological and online forms of violence as the most targeting female politicians, also highlighting impacts of such violence as discouraging women from entering and remaining in politics or refraining them from expose themselves in the public speaking. However, from the institutional side, the briefing also investigate institutional tools that have been developed in recent years in order to respond to the persistent gap, here it acknowledge that the EP has introduced many internal mechanisms but it also stress the persistent underreporting rate.

Why is it that important? By reading Zamfir (2025) alongside IPU/PACE 2018 it is clearly possible to understand what has formally changed and what has not over the seven years

²³⁵ European Parliament, *Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament*. 10th parliamentary term, July 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/rules/rules20240716/Rules20240716_EN.pdf

²³⁶ Zamfir, I. (2025) Violence against women active in politics in the EU: a serious obstacle to political participation. (PE 759.600) *European Parliamentary Research Service*, November 2025.

covered by this research. But what is even more useful about this text, is that its documentation of the gap between formal commitment and reality directly anticipates the findings of the interviews data that will be further analysed in the Chapter 4. There, Italian female MEPs will describe a similar disconnection between the existence of reporting tools and their effectiveness.

Then, the documents which have been excluded from the corpus. Among these: *annual reports*, published by the *Advisory Committee on Harassment*, were not included because of the struggles involved in their finding; but also, because their content is almost totally reflected in the 2023 Resolution, which is explicitly referencing to the Committee's work. Then, another excluded document was the *European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*. Reasons for exclusion were related to the focus of the topic it addressed, taking into account gender equality in a too broader way. In this sense, the document was not specific to this thesis frame as the EP as a workplace. Finally, the *Code of Conduct* ruling *2024 European Elections* was left out because it regulated the behavior during specific timespan of the last elections, not reflecting the internal dynamics of the Parliament as an institution. Notably, it is not directly relevant to this research's aim: seeking to investigate the everyday experiences of a female MEP.

Here below, Table 2 includes the list of documents that have been analysed. Documents marked as **Internal**, refer to ones specifically ruling the European Parliament's own internal procedures, conduct of standards and institutional responses. In that way, those constitute the primary source to analyse implementation gap between the EP's formal commitment and real institutional practices. Furthermore, "External" documents provide the broader context where EP's internal framework is located.

Table 2: Document Corpus

DOCUMENT	YEAR	NATURE	PRODUCED BY	MAIN FOCUS	AIM
IPU/PACE- <i>Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe</i>	2018	Empirical Study	IPU + PACE	Prevalence of VAWIP, underreporting and reporting mechanisms in European Parliaments	External
Corbett Report	2019	Institutional reform resolution	European Parliament	Amendment of Rules of Procedure post MeTooEP, this is the first explicit prohibition of harassment	Internal
Rules of Procedure + Code of Appropriate Behaviour	2019	Normative framework	European Parliament	Formal prohibition of harassment, conduct standards and sanctions	Internal
4a. EPRS – <i>Combating Gender-Based Violence: Cyber Violence</i>	2021	Technical study	EPRS	Mapping cyberbiolence, national legislation fragmentation and policy options	External
4b. EP Resolution on Cyberviolence	2021	Legislative resolution	European Parliament	Formal recognition of cyberviolence as a threat to women's political participation	Internal
Resolution of 1 June 2023	2023	Institutional self-assessment resolution	European Parliament	Evaluation of post MeTooEP reforms, acknowledgement of persistent implementation gap	Internal
Rules of Procedure + Code of Appropriate Behaviour	2024	Normative framework	European Parliament	Updated conduct standards, sanctions and harassment governance framework	Internal
EPRS Briefing- Zamfir	2025	Empirical research briefing	EPRS	Overview of VAWIP across EU, state of Institutional responses	External

The process applied to the document corpus was structured in two different stages. First, each document was read fully, in order to primarily identify the general framing and language used to address to VAWIP. The second stage, then, implied a manual coding system on Microsoft Word. Here, different colors were assigned to each of the five thematic categories. This is an ex-post approach: the thematic categories derive from the theoretical framework and are then redefined through the preliminary reading of the document corpus. In that way, this method ensures to be responsive to the specific content of each document, while maintaining consistency.

3.3 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were crucial to go beyond the words in texts, so as to explore the lived experience of MEPs for this thesis. Distancing from Literature, the RQs driving this research are not asking just what forms of VAWIP do female MEPs experience, rather, they ask *how* are these experiences perceived and understood. In general, questions try to discover a subjective and personal picture that victims gave to those mechanisms. In this sense, interviews allow participants to speak in their terms and to elaborate experiences while introducing the gender dimension of violence occurring in the political domain.

The choice of a semi-structured architecture has been made to escape from pre-determined categories that a fully-structured interview would have imposed. At the same time, a fully-unstructured architecture would have created a difficult comparison between MEPs' experiences. Then, the semi-structured format has been depicted as the most useful tool, especially when treating such a complex phenomenon. A guiding framework of questions and themes ensures consistency and coordination across all seven interviews, but it also leaves flexibility to follow different paths, allowing participants to talk about what they consider more significant. Moreover, the sensitivity of the research topic was a further consideration in choosing semi-structured interviews: by discussing violence experiences and questionable institutional failure require a flexibility that closed-ended instruments do not produce. Semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed for the gradual trust building and produced the creation of a space where participants could speak honestly.

Participants have been selected based on their direct relevance to research questions. The target population was Italian female Members of the European Parliament actually holding

office (2024-2029 term). The decision to focus on Italian MEPs was guided by methodological and practical considerations: a shared mother language allows for a more open and nuanced conversation based on a sensitive topic. In this sense, by conducting these interviews in Italian, has reduced the communicative distance on emotionally delicate issues. Moreover, being Italian allows for familiarity with the Italian political context, a corner that enable a more precise reading of how personal experiences relate to party positioning and culture. Notably, Italian MEPs were also more accessible for the purpose of this research than MEPs from other national delegations, due to the fact that in a preliminary stage of thesis organization, English written email were sent to all members of the FEMM Committee, receiving no answers.

However, about contacting female Italian MEPs; the search began with those serving in the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender equality (FEMM), then, extending to the full national delegation. MEPs from past terms were also contacted where possible, but their institutional email addresses were no longer active, yet, this group was found significantly harder to reach. Contact began via the official institutional email addresses that are listed on the European Parliament's website ²³⁷.

In total, 35 MEPs were contacted. The Italian delegation to EP in the 2024-2029 term is made of 29 MEPs distributed across six political groups. Of these 29, 8 are serving their second mandate. The mail was sent to all 29 Italian female MEPs, as well as to 6 of former Members of the FEMM Committee, whose have been identified through the EP's records.

Of the 35 contacted, 7 answered in a positive way, agreeing to participate, while 4 responded but decline due to their scheduling constrains. 24 did not respond at all. Of those who answered and declined the proposal, none cited a lack of relevant experiences. Rather, several expressed great appreciations for the subject, stressing the importance of such topic and this research, unfortunately, they address scheduling constrains as the reason of unavailability. But adding things like:

<<La ringrazio per il Suo messaggio e per aver condiviso il Suo progetto di ricerca, che affronta un tema estremamente importante e rilevante.>> (Contacted MEP)

[“Thank you for your message and to having shared your research project, it embody and extremely important and relevant thematic”]

²³⁷ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/it/home>

Seven MEPs agreed to participate. These, produced a sample that moves across five different political groups, including both first and second terms. Within the list, just two of them are members of the FEMM Committee, and one holds a substitute membership. The full list of contacted MEPs and the message sent them are provided in Appendix E. Table 3 reports their name, their political group and their political affiliation. The format in which the interviews has been conducted is reported as well.

The sample reflects an broad range of political affiliations, from the left to the centre-right and right of the political spectrum. From the Confederal Group of the *European United Left* and the *Nordic Green Left* (GUE/NGL) and the groups of the *Greens* and *European Free Alliance* (Greens/EFA), to the group of the *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats* (S&D), the *European People's Party* (EPP) and *Patriots for Europe*. Such diversity is methodologically significant in that it ensures that the findings are not confined to a single ideological perspective about gender equality.

Interviews were conducted between 1st April and 26th May 2026: four were conducted via video call, allowing then for a dynamic conversation and face-to face interaction. Three participants, *Georgia Tramacere*, *Giusi Princi* and the *Anonymous MEP 7* provided written responses to interview questions. A format that their asked as an alternative to the video-call, in order to accommodate to their political agenda.

Table 3. Interview Participants

MEPs	POLITICAL GROUP	NATIONAL PARTY	FORMAT
ALESSANDRA MORETTI	S&D	Partito Democratico	Video Call
ANNALISA CORRADO	S&D	Partito Democratico	Video Call
CRISTINA GUARDA	Greens/EFA	Europa Verde	Video Call
VALENTINA PALMISANO	GUE/NGL	Movimento 5 Stelle	Video Call
GEORGIA TRAMACERE	S&D	Partito Democratico	Written
GIUSI PRINCI	EPP	Forza Italia	Written
ANONYMOUS			Written

Therefore, two versions of questions guide were developed to answer their requests. A total of fifteen questions were developed for the semi-structured interviews and eight questions for written responses. Each format was tailored to the different dynamics but still maintaining the thematic consistency across all seven participants. The interview path was structured on the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2 and upon the findings of the document analysis conducted in Chapter 4. Then, questions investigate precisely the dimensions that the documentary corpus did not address, as the lived experience of subtler and normalised hostility and the real impact of violence on women politician's behaviour. The oral interview guide was then organised around four thematic areas, trying to close the gap between what the Institution formally say about VAWIP, and what female MEPs experience. In doing so, the categories developed to understand literature and document corpus were transformed into questions:

1. The institutional climate inside the European Parliament and the role of gender in shaping daily activities.
2. The manifestations of gendered hostility and delegitimization within and outside the institution.
3. The impact of the online dimension on political participation and visibility.
4. The suitability of the EP's formal response mechanisms

Each interview took about 35 minutes, opening with nearly two minute introduction. A limited timeframe dedicated to interviews, given that their political agenda is so full. In this sense, the choice to maintain time-limited interviews is not a limit but a strategy to attract more responses. Here, explaining the research's purposes once again and reassuring about the focus on professional experiences only. Then, a series of follow-up questions, asking for examples and frequency of occurrence were displayed to encourage elaboration, where needed. The written questionnaire, used for the three respondents needing it, was based on the same thematic structure but condensed into eight questions. Even if the live follow-up was not possible here, it was partially composed by the written forms, whose medium allows participants to reflect while writing.

All interviews were conducted in the Italian language, a choice that was agreed in consultation with this thesis Supervisor. Based upon the fact that discussing experiences of violence in own's first language can reduce barriers while encouraging a more detailed response on sensitive matters. Yet, for the purpose of this thesis, interview claims will be

cited in Chapter 5 in the original language, along with the English translation. The full interview guide that has been used for oral and written questionnaires are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B.

3.4 Data Analysis

This thesis follows the logic of Thematic Analysis. As outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke ²³⁸, this is a flexible approach that allows researchers to create new concepts and ideas, based on data. In this case, thematic analysis is sequentially applied across two distinct empirical sources: Institutional Documents and Interview data, whose will be analysed respectively in Chapter 4 and 5.

This thesis has analysed these two sources at separate stages, not as a single dataset. In this way, the aim is to elevate their analytical weight and complementarity. At first, the documental corpus was examined through a set of categories that emerge from the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1 and 2. These categories will serve as a critical lens, useful to read the selected institutional documents and to catch what they do not describe. Yet, the aim of this first stage is to identify how VAWIP is framed by the institutional narrative, but also how does it respond to the problem and what does it leave unsaid. In this sense, silences and absences of some issues related to VAWIP acquire a significant meaning, they indicate institutional recognition. Furthermore, the second stage will base upon the same thematic categories but applied to interview data. This process will allow for a comparison between the institutional narrative and the MEPs' lived experiences. The focus shift from the first stage, investigating what the Institution say to the second, reporting what women experience. Here, capturing both sides, the implementation gap will emerge, founding what differs from formal acknowledgment and lived experiences.

The five thematic categories adopted to guide this thesis derive from the convergence of many points. The theoretical framework, combined with the existing literature about VAWIP and the institutional documents examination develop a composite frame.

The themes chosen to guide the analysis, are:

²³⁸ Braun V., Clarke V., (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 3(2), p.77-101

Offline forms of VAWIP, a first category that points to examine violence and gendered hostility experienced within the European Parliament walls. This classification includes both visible and subtle manifestations of violence such as interruption, competence questioning or paternalism.

The second category is the *Online dimension of VAWIP* and the forms it takes. Which means acts of: cyberviolence, sexual attacks, threats or image-based abuse perpetrated online through digital platforms and social media. This dimension, treated differently from the offline one, allows for a precise map of institutional admissions and omissions.

Behavioural responses and silencing effects, a critical category that examines how online and offline experiences of VAWIP go shaping MEPs' political behaviour. In this sense, responses like self-censorship, topic avoidance or changes in public exposure are taken into account. This mostly represents the gap in the existing literature, as most documents focus on the acts of violence itself and not on their consequences.

The fourth category is called *Institutional responses and formal mechanisms*, this one examines tools and procedure that the EP has formally adopted in order to address VAWIP. A category that was included because the research question driving this thesis is also questioning how the Institution address the phenomenon of VAWIP. Responses and formal mechanisms include: codes on conduct, trainings, availability of reporting mechanisms and sanctions established. A category that will be mostly applied to documents in Chapter 4, yet, it allows for an assessment of the EP's commitment to solve the problem.

Then, the last category is the *Implementation gap*. This latter constitutes the core of this thesis, examining the distance between what institution formally commits to, and what female MEPs actually observe in first line. This is right the space between all the other categories, a space that is structural and which visibility is one of the central contribution of this thesis.

Data management was conducted manually by using Microsoft Word as the only tool. After having read all the documents and interview transcript, relevant passages were highlighted using different colors. Each color was linked to a different thematic category. This manual approach was adopted after the expiry of the weekly MAXQDA licence, the initially used coding tool, which provided the organisational idea. Despite the time needed, the manual coding allowed for a deeper engagement with materials and thematic categories as well.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This thesis follows the ethical principles generally guiding the qualitative research that involves people as participants: the ethical standards were applied through informed consent, transparency about research purposes and secure data storage. All the seven Italian female MEPs that participated to the interviews received a detailed information sheet (Appendix C) that explained the object and the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time without any consequence and the conditions under which their data will be used. Then, signed consent forms were collected before the interview was scheduled.

Everyone explicitly chose not to remain anonymous, allowing to be identified by name in the present thesis, everyone but *MEP 7*. One participant requested anonymity when she sent me her written responses. In this sense, her response will be included in the analysis but attributed to a non-identified participant and any identifying details have been removed or paraphrased. A free decision, the one of non-anonymity, that is highlighted by Table 2 in section 3.3 where their names, their political affiliation and national parties were registered after their approval. Regarding the four interviews conducted via video-call, audio recordings were made by using a personal device, as discussed above, participants were largely informed of the recording in advance by verbally introducing the research once face-to-face and through the informational sheet/consent form (Appendix C). No video recording was made. While, regarding audio recordings, these were used just for the research purposes, once having produced accurate transcriptions recordings were stored on a personal computer, accessible to no one else. Furthermore, the three participants who provided written responses did not require any recording, because their responses were delivered via mail in written form.

Every research must acknowledge its limitations transparently. Limitations and not weaknesses of the research itself, but boundaries that this latter cannot overcome due to deadlines and research level.

The most significant limitation concerning this thesis is the actual size and composition of the sample interviewed. While seven participants reflect a meaningful number for qualitative in-depth research, it could be not so representative of the full population of female MEPs across the European Parliament. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on Italian female MEPs, even if deeply justified in section 3.3, could also reflect a specific national and cultural experience. In some ways, the dynamics that are shaped by the Italian political context and

the gender norms developed in the country may not b translate directly to MEPs from other places. For that reason, this thesis is not supposed to speak for the EP as a whole, rather, it tries to offer a contextualised ground to address VAWIP and how does it operate from the point of view of the chosen national delegation.

A second limitation reflect the different ways in which interviews were conducted. While the four semi-structured interviews were oral and allowed for a dynamic interaction, the three written questionnaires did not. This asymmetry is then considered as a methodological constraint, even though, the written nature of these responses is still a valuable form of experiences reflection, even if different.

A third limitation concerns the timeframe taken into account: the period that goes from 2018 to 2026 was chosen to deliberately capture the post MeTooEP campaign. Reflecting this, this thesis' aim is not to question whether violence existed before due to the highly documented phenomenon in literature, but is to understand whether the reforms introduced after the movement did produce meaningful change or not. Yet, this focus can be both a strength and a constraint, because it allows for narrower assessment of institutional change while not capturing the longer historical timing that preceded the campaign.

Notably, to conclude, it is worth it to take into account also the social bias. As affecting all qualitative research that are based on self-reported experiences, participants may have chosen to emphasise certain experiences while downplaying others, probably to safeguard their party or institution, or even driven by reluctance to appear as victims themselves. As said before, this is a limitation related to interview-based research that inquire about sensitive topics, however, this research tries to mitigate it with the confidential and non-judging framing of interviews.

To conclude, this chapter stands outlining the methodological architecture of this thesis, developing choices, justifications and the procedures that draw this investigation. It described the approach chosen and why the European Parliament stands as crucial case. Then, it described the two complementary methods: document analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews, explaining how these have been designed. The document corpus of seven institutional texts from 2018 to 2026, was shown to provide a temporal record of how the EP and international bodies have formally defined and responded to the phenomenon. Then, the interview sample of seven Italian female MEPs has been presented, highlighting the broad range of political affiliations. Together, these two sources promise to highlight the

implementation gap this thesis investigates. Furthermore, the research is built upon the distinction of five thematic categories: forms of VAWIP offline, forms of VAWIP online, behavioural responses, institutional responses and implementation gap. It is right through the application of these five categories across both sources that the distance between formal commitment and reality will be made clear.

A note on the use of AI

Because of transparency, this thesis acknowledges the use of generative artificial intelligence tools at some stages of the research process. In the preliminary spets of the research AI was used to support the organisation and to help with the source material. In particular, Notebook LM ²³⁹ was used as a synthesis assistant. Here, a hundred of already personally inspected academic sources were provided by the researcher. Prompts were then refined through an iterative process before being submitted to Notebook LM In this path, the tool was able to respond by identifying thematic connections across the huge literature. This use of AI was strictly organisation driven, helping with the connection of the large body of literature , without generating any content or source itself. Furthermore, AI was also used at certain stages to support the refinement of written expression.

²³⁹ Generative AI platform

4. Document Analysis

This chapter will present the findings emerging from the document analysis of the seven texts that were selected for the aim of this thesis, chosen among documents developed from 2018 to 2026. The architecture draws upon the five thematic categories outlined in Chapter 3:

- Offline forms of VAWIP
- Online dimension of VAWIP
- Behavioural responses
- Institutional responses
- Implementation gap.

These themes were developed to show how, the European Parliament and other relevant international bodies, have formally defined and responded to VAWIP after the MeTooEP movement.

The analysis develop thematically, passing through different documents rather than analysing each one distinctly. The choice is driven by the fact that many documents are just the new version of older ones, another method will then provide repetitions of certain things that remained unchanged through years. Each section will trace what institutional documents say about the given dimension, how did the frame evolve and how did the language shift from recognition of the phenomenon to action. Especially in matter of framing, particular attention will be directed to the distinction between a binding and a more aspirational language. As will be shown, the distance between what documents formally prohibits and what they just encourage is a consistent marker of implementation gap.

Consequently, this chapter will close with the things that documents do not say. Exploring the most significant absences and silences about special focuses. These institutional silences will be analysed directly in Chapter 5, by reporting what female Italian MEPs identify as everyday hostile experiences, inside and outside the Parliament's walls.

4.1 Offline Forms of Violence Against Women in Politics

The documentary corpus chosen, reveals to contain a great tension about offline forms of VAWIP. Among these, empirical studies such as IPU/PACE 2018, even if referring to European parliaments rather than the EP specifically, document the phenomenon with specificity, while the normative framework produced by the European Parliament itself, just address in a generic way to the problem, also using gender-neutral terminology. As presented, the IPU/PACE joint study of 2018 suggest that more than 85% of female MEPs reported having experienced psychological violence once in term, and that *<< 24.7 per cent had suffered sexual violence. 14.8 per cent had suffered physical violence.>>*²⁴⁰. Moreover, the institutions present a significant number of victims of this violence within the institutional spaces themselves: *<< In 34.4 per cent of cases, the incidents occurred on parliamentary premises, and during political meetings and election campaigns>>*²⁴¹ adding that in nearly 80% of cases, sexual violence has been perpetrated by male colleagues. The study also documents about the most diffused dimension of gendered hostility: women parliamentarians reported to be *<< more frequently interrupted when speaking in the assembly chamber>>*²⁴² being also targeted through commentary on their physical appearance and consistently exposed to symbolic violence. There is also evidence that, some male colleagues, are often deploying denigration and domination attitudes over their female counterparts, acts that are understood here as explicit mechanisms for assessing political power, by citing:

*<< When entering that area, women, because they are under-represented or do not comply with the established gender norm, may encounter hostility and resistance. Those interviewed, both female parliamentarians and female parliamentary staff, attributed primarily the sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments to gender stereotyping and gender hierarchy. Some respondents mentioned that, for some men, denigrating women and displays of virility was their way of asserting political power>>*²⁴³

These findings are also shared by Zamfir (2025), confirming that psychological and symbolic violence

²⁴⁰ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2018). *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe*. p. 1

²⁴¹ IPU/PACE (2018), p.7

²⁴² Ivi, p.16

²⁴³ Ivi, p.11

<< including attacks on women's private life, physical appearance or marital status, as well as symbolic violence seeking to marginalise women and make them feel incompetent, are part of everyday politics in Europe.>> ²⁴⁴ .

However, the normative response to this reality is often abstract. The first explicit prohibition of psychological and sexual harassment was introduced by the Corbett Report (2019) through the Amendment 13, a new paragraph 3e proposal that claims: *<< Members shall refrain from any type of psychological or sexual harassment >> ²⁴⁵* that, at the same time, established also a mechanism for immediate intervention when occurring offensive language. Once accepted, the Rules of Procedure (2019) translated what suggested into the Rule 10 (paragraph 6) ²⁴⁶ . Basically, this was the first time harassment was named and prohibited formally into the European Parliament's internal governance. Still there, the Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2019), which was then attached as Annex II of the Rules of Procedure (2019), provide further informations by adding conduct standards for MEPs: *<<Members will behave in a professional manner and must refrain, in their relations with staff, from, in particular, degrading, insulting, offensive or discriminatory language or any other actions which are unethical, demeaning or unlawful.>> ²⁴⁷* in other words. It require MEPs to behave following certain behavioural standards, refraining from discriminating others, especially staff members. Later, the 2024 version ²⁴⁸ of both texts will represent these suggestions as unchanged, but adding a mandatory anti-harassment training that directly answers to the Resolution of 1st June 2023 that will be later analysed.

In general, there is a gap between data standing from empirical documents and what the normative response provides. As seen, the institutional texts frame offline VAWIP in terms of visible conduct, acting like offensive language and explicit misconduct, but the subtler behaviour remain largely unreported. The microaggressions reported both by IPU/PACE (2018) and Zamfir (2025) are known as interruptions, commentary upon the physical appearance, competence questioning and so on... these are the issues that are not found in the

²⁴⁴ Zamfir, I. (2025) Violence against women active in politics in the EU: a serious obstacle to political participation. (PE 759.600) *European Parliamentary Research Service*, November 2025 p.7

²⁴⁵ European Parliament. (2019). *Amendments to Parliament's Rules of Procedures*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0046_EN.html p.6

²⁴⁶ European Parliament, (2019). *Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament*. 9th parliamentary term, December 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-9-2019-07-02_EN.html p.19

²⁴⁷ European Parliament, (2019). *Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament*. 9th parliamentary term, December 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RULES-9-2019-07-02_EN.html p.142

²⁴⁸ European Parliament, *Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament*. 10th parliamentary term, July 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/rules/rules20240716/Rules20240716_EN.pdf

EP's normative framework. There, the Resolution of the 1st June 2023 is closer to their acknowledgement. In this sense, this latter frame sexual harassment as a consequence of the patriarchal nature of political structures and inequalities that are embedded into institutions, by saying that: << *Sexual harassment must be understood in the light of male power and wider gender-inequality, as it is a consequence of gender based stereotypes, heteropatriarchal structures, structural and institutional inequalities.*>> ²⁴⁹ some acknowledgements that still do not translate into concrete governance tools able to address the problem.

Physical paternalism and unwanted touches that female politicians frequently report is totally absent from the recording. While, the Corbett Report (2019) introduced a prohibition toward a single-gender committee composition, there is not document in the available corpus that address the horizontal segregation. Notably, these silences are not random: Chapter 5 will show later how do they correspond to the gendered hostility mostly reported by Italian female MEPs.

²⁴⁹ European Parliament. (2023). *European Parliament resolution of 1 June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and MeToo evaluation*. Point D, p.3

4.2 Online Dimensions of Violence Against Women in Politics

While the offline dimension of VAWIP was said to be reported in a generic and maybe insufficient manner by the institutional corpus, what is even more significant, is about the online dimension. This particularly important sphere is widely highlighted with its scale and impact through empirical texts but it was not a priority for the EP's normative framework at first.

Again, there is nothing ambiguous about data developed by IPU/PACE 2018 study, which documented that over 58% of female MPs, from all over European parliaments, *<< said that they had seen images or comments about them which were disparaging or had a sexual connotation. In 66.7 per cent of cases, abusive, sexual or violent content and behavior on social networks is the work of perpetrators who act remotely and anonymously.>>*²⁵⁰ as they reported, they were targeted by death and rape threats, as their family, in these cases: *<< Electronic communications, through social networks, e-mail or the telephone, are the primary means of delivering these threats against female MPs. In 75.5 per cent of cases, the perpetrators of these threats are anonymous male citizens.>>*²⁵¹. The study also documents image-based abuses, nude photomontage and videos targeting female Members of Parliaments across Europe. In this sense, it calls urgently for regulations to address all kinds of online threats and cyberviolence: a call that has been largely unheard.

Furthermore, the EPRS technical study, supporting the EP Resolution on Cyberviolence (2021), estimated that: *<< 4 to 7 % of women in the EU-27 have experienced cyber harassment during the past 12 months>>* as *<<the prevalence of the phenomenon has risen with greater internet and social media use>>* and that *<<the prevalence of gender-based cyber violence is likely to continue to rise.>>*²⁵². In this sense, this Resolution (2021) is the first European Parliament's legislative instrument that specifically address gender-based cyberviolence. In doing that, it is a useful tool that identifies the full spectrum of online violence. Mentioning: harassment, stalking, image-based abuse, deepfakes, sexist hate speech and so on... it also explicitly says that women in public life:

²⁵⁰ IPU/PACE (2018), p.6

²⁵¹ Ivi, p.7

²⁵² European Parliamentary research service. (2021). *Combating gender-based violence: Cyber violence. European added value assessment.* (EPRS_STU(2021)662621).
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU\(2021\)662621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU(2021)662621_EN.pdf) p.5

<< journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders and other public figures, are particularly impacted by gender-based cyberviolence, and whereas this causes them not only reputational damage, psychological harm and suffering but can also lead to disruption to a victim's living situation, invasions of privacy and damage to personal relationships and family lives and can deter victims from participating digitally in political, social, economic and cultural life.>>²⁵³.

And it also identifies the so called *silencing effect* as *<< with the effect of discouraging the presence of women in public life, including politics and decision-making spheres>>²⁵⁴* in other words, the chilling consequence of violence that affects women's willingness to remain in politics.

However, in 2023 thanks to the Resolution on MeToo, it was possible to acknowledge that it was not just a problem concerning European parliaments in Member States, rather, it is a phenomenon affecting the EP as well. In this sense, it explicitly noted that female politicians and those who advocated for women's rights are *<<particularly likely to be victims of online violence and cyber harassment>>²⁵⁵*. These data were then confirmed by Zamfir (2025) noting that psychological and cyber violence were actually the most prevalent forms that female politicians across EU Member States experienced everyday, where: *<<Female politicians and political staff were far more exposed to harassment and psychological violence than men, namely to sexual violence threats, prejudicial slurs, (digital) sexual harassment.>>²⁵⁶.*

It is right next to this rich empirical evidence that the EP's silence is striking. The Corbett Report, the Rules of Procedure and the Code of Appropriate Behaviour, all adopted in 2019, known as the year after the MeTooEP advent, contain no reference about the online dimension of VAWIP.

Furthermore, the 2024 production does not apport any changes. Here, the institution that at first promoted the most comprehensive EU instrument about cyberviolence and that called for women protection online, is the same institutions that do not provide any specific protection

²⁵³ European Parliament. (2021) *European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on combating gender-based violence: cyberviolence (2020/2035(INL))*. (P9_TA(2021)0489). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0489_EN.html Point AC, p.10

²⁵⁴ EP Resolution on Cyberviolence (2021), Point 34, p.16

²⁵⁵ European Parliament. (2023). *European Parliament resolution of 1 June 2023 on sexual harassment in the EU and MeToo evaluation. (2022/2138(INI))*. P9_TA(2023)0217, *Official Journal of the European Union*. (C/2023/1224), 21 December 2023. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:C_202301224 Point F, p.4

²⁵⁶ Zamfir (2025), p.8

against the major form affecting MEPs: cyberviolence. This could be taken as a structural feature of how EP manages the cyberviolence problem, more as an external agenda than an internal challenge.

4.3 Behavioural Responses and Silencing Effect

Between the five thematic categories, examined in this fourth Chapter, this one assuming behavioural responses and the silencing effect is the most paradoxical. Even if the empirical evidence of how VAWIP actually reshapes female politicians' behaviour is amply documented, what emerge from the document corpus is that these institutional instruments act as the consequences of violence was not their competence.

The IPU/PACE study (2018) highlights the behavioural impact of VAWIP by reporting that:

<<33.3 per cent of female parliamentarians stated that the acts of violence to which they had been subjected had affected their freedom of expression and scope for action during their term of office. They admitted to “being more guarded” in what they said and in the stances they took, becoming “more cautious and more watchful” and seeking to be “a little less visible”.>> ²⁵⁷

Some, closed their social media accounts or tried to limit their online presence, someone else started also voicing less, due to the fear of their opinion counting nothing. Furthermore,

<<57.7 per cent of the female parliamentarians having been subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence stressed that they had been left distraught by what had happened to them. Others had felt humiliated, angered, saddened or disoriented at the time. Several reported that violence or harassment had triggered anxiety, health problems or sleep disorders.>> ²⁵⁸

A picture that is progressively reinforced by analysing the entire corpus of documents. A clear example is the 2021 Cyberviolence Resolution, the one reporting how violence leads victims using pseudonyms while maintaining low profiles in online platforms, by also deleting their accounts and silencing themselves from the entirely social and political life. In this sense the resolution (2021) refer to violence as it *<< can silence female voices and*

²⁵⁷ IPU/PACE (2018), p.10

²⁵⁸ *Ibidem*

opinions>> ²⁵⁹. Notably, the Resolution (2021) also identifies a critic dynamic: the chilling effects that is created by cyberviolence against women in politics, does not remain in the digital sphere solo, rather, it merges into offline behaviour and public debate.

Starting from this point, the EPRS (2021) also translates these dynamics into an economic count. By measuring dropoff from politics, the lowered workforce presence and the reduced productivity as well as many other factors, they were able to measure the consequences of cyberviolence, without forget about how << *sexual harassment can have a silencing effect and negative impact on victims' pay, career progression and working conditions, and potentially drive individuals out of the world of work.* >> ²⁶⁰. Nonetheless, Zamfir (2025) also confirmed the persistence of these patterns by noting that << *Violence discourages women from participating in politics, and therefore perpetuates gender imbalance and under-representation.* >> ²⁶¹ noting that online violence often motivates some women to drop out altogether, making that silencing effect a structural threat to democracy.

Female behavioural responses are treated as outcomes that need to be noted rather than as institutional problems that need to be solved! Once again, the Corbett Report, the Rules of Procedure and the Code of Appropriate Behaviour of 2019 made no references about behavioural responses, nor about the silencing effect, while their 2024 counterparts reflect the same silence. What emerge is that the EP's instruments are formally designed to regulate MEPs conduct and to regulate what MEPs can or cannot do. Importantly, they do not ever address about adaptive behaviour of female Members adopt in response to such hostility, in general is possible to claim that the institution formally prohibits harassment without really address its consequences. By almost exclusively focusing on perpetrators' conduct, the institution is therefore addressing the silencing effects as the victim's problem, not as the institution's one.

Decision to not report, withdrawal from political sphere, self-censorship, drop off social media are just few of responses that are treated as individual incidents and mechanisms. But, in a ideal manner, these should be addressed as symptoms of a systemic institutional failure. It is right this blind spot that will be reflected in Chapter 5, when Italian female MEPs will clarify how did they ever modified their behaviour in response to sustained online and offline hostility.

²⁵⁹ EP Resolution on Cyberviolence (2021), Point AD, p. 10

²⁶⁰ EPRS (2021), p.6

²⁶¹ Zamfir (2025) p.2

4.4 Institutional Responses and Formal Mechanisms

The European Parliament's institutional answers to VAWIP seem to be understood as a layered accumulation of reforms, which were introduced due to external pressure. In particular, the documentary corpus depicts the evolution of formal mechanisms across seven years after the MeTooEP campaign. Here, this thesis is able to reveal some institutional, natural, advancements and certain persistent limitations.

The Corbett Report (2019) represented the first European Parliament's formal acknowledgement about the governance required to contain harassment. It is already clear that Amendment 13 firstly introduced a prohibition of psychological and sexual harassment into the Rules of Procedure (2019). Here, by claiming: << *Members may not be elected as office- holders of Parliament or one of its bodies, be appointed as rapporteur or participate in an official delegation or interinstitutional negotiations, if they have not signed the declaration*>> ²⁶² it linked the possibility for MEPs to still holding office, to the signation of the declaration committed to the Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2019). It was then the same reform that proposed the introduction of a Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan << *plan aimed at incorporating a gender perspective in all Parliament's activities.*>> ²⁶³ signalling at least the formal commitment to spread gender equality across parliamentary activities. The Rules of Procedure (2019)'s second Annex (II), already known as Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2019) translated all these principles into concrete standards ruling MEPs' conducts: << *Members will sign a declaration confirming their commitment to complying with this Code. All declarations, whether signed or not, will be published on Parliament's website*>> ²⁶⁴ and again, << *Members will cooperate promptly and fully with the procedures in place for managing situations of conflict or harassment (psychological or sexual), including responding promptly to any allegations of harassment. Members should take part in specialised training.*>> ²⁶⁵. Yet, requiring MEPs to cooperate with established procedures, it encourage participation to specialised trainings, notably using the soft language as "should take part", which is absolutely not a binding obligation.

It was nearly the same time when IPU/PACE (2018) provided informations about the institutional context in which these reforms would have been assessed:

²⁶² Corbett Report (2019) Amendment 13, p.6

²⁶³ Ivi, Amendment 89/rev, p.29

²⁶⁴ Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2019), Point 6

²⁶⁵ Ivi, Point 5

<< At the European Parliament, the advisory committee responsible for dealing with complaints of harassment [...] comprises five members, of whom three are parliamentarians chosen by the President of the Parliament [...], one member appointed by the accredited parliamentary assistants committee and one representative of the administration. A representative of the medical service and a representative of the legal service of the European Parliament are also present. In a proven case of harassment, following a confidential internal investigation and on the recommendation of the advisory committee, the President can impose a sanction in accordance with Rule 166 of the European Parliament's Rules of Procedure (ranging from a reprimand to the suspension or removal of a number of parliamentary functions).>> ²⁶⁶

In other words, it documented that the EP's advisory committee was primarily of MEPs judging their colleagues. Must not be surprised that:

<<There have not been any sanctions imposed against MEPs for sexual harassment to date.>>²⁶⁷ which means that, no sanctions against MEPs were imposed prior to its publication. Findings that may be striking with the study's broader recommendations for confidential complaints procedures and independent investigation mechanisms call.

The Resolution of 1st june 2023 constitutes then the most important act of institutional self-assessment: by acknowledging that the European parliament is not safe: *<< the European Parliament is unfortunately not a safe workplace, as cases of sexual and other forms of harassment occur to this date.>> ²⁶⁸* with harassment continuing to occur, low reporting rates and persisting impunity culture. All this amounted then to the conclusion that : *<< measures taken so far have been insufficient as harassment still occurs in all EU institutions, reporting remains low, victims are not assisted properly and the culture of impunity remains>> ²⁶⁹* specifically, the Resolution (2023) also documented a specific metric: *<<only 260 Members out of 705 Members have completed the training which represents 36,9 % of all members>> ²⁷⁰*

Moreover, it also noted that the maximum available sanction : *<< consists of one month suspension of daily allowance or one month suspension of activity for MEPs, which can be*

²⁶⁶ IPU/PACE (2018), p.15

²⁶⁷ *Ibidem*

²⁶⁸ EP Resolution on MeTooEP (2023), Point H, p. 5

²⁶⁹ *Ibidem*

²⁷⁰ EP Resolution on MeTooEP (2023), Point 25

doubled in the event of repeated breaches>> ²⁷¹, noting that << *these sanctions are not proportionate in the light of the severe damage suffered by the victims of harassment*>> ²⁷².

In response to this self-assessment, the Rules of Procedure (2024) and its Annex, the Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2024) adopted three main changes.

At first, Rule 10 Paragraph 6 imposed the mandatory training along with a precise deadline:

*<<Members may not be elected as office-holders of Parliament [...] (a) if they have not signed the declaration confirming their commitment to complying with that Code, including completing the specialised training organised for them by Parliament on preventing conflict and harassment in the workplace and on good office management; or (b) if they have not completed the specialised training referred to in point (a) in breach of the deadline and conditions laid down in that Code.>>*²⁷³

Which is a direct response to the 36.9% completion rate mentioned before (EP Resolution on MeTooEP, 2023). Secondly, the document stands at maximise the sanctions from 30 days to 60 days, extending the Parliament's main page publication to the Member's individual page on the EP's website, by officially saying:

<<Members who have not already done so shall take part in specialised training organised for them by Parliament on preventing conflict and harassment in the workplace and on good office management. That training shall be completed within the first six months of the Member's term of office save in duly substantiated exceptional cases. The Members' certificates of completion of that training will be published on Parliament's website.>> ²⁷⁴

Third, the language of the Code (2024) has been strengthened as well. Shifting from <<Members will cooperate promptly and fully [...] Members should take part in specialised training >> ²⁷⁵ to a more binding language: <<Members will cooperate fully, in accordance with the procedures laid down by the Bureau>> ²⁷⁶.

These reforms represent measurable progress. However, must also point attention to the structural features that remained unchanged across the timespan, in particular about Rule 183

²⁷¹ EP Resolution on MeTooEP (2023), Point 19

²⁷² *Ibidem*

²⁷³ Rules of procedure (2024) Rule 10, Paragraph 6, p.19

²⁷⁴ Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2024) Point 5

²⁷⁵ Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2019) Point 5

²⁷⁶ Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2024) Point 5

determining penalties. In cases of harassment occurring, under Rule 10(6), the president is supposed to only << *following the establishment of the occurrence of a harassment in accordance with the applicable internal administrative procedure on harassment and its prevention* >>²⁷⁷. This action is present both in 2019 and 2024 versions and may be creating a procedural barrier before any sanction is applied. Nonetheless, that procedure has been described by the Resolution of 1st June 2023 as possibly taking up to two years, inflicting then more harm to victims. Then, in general, this is something that 2024 reform could have fixed, but it was not. Lastly, must pay attention to the non-presence of the online dimension across the Rules of Procedure (2019/2024), the Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2019/2024) and the Corbett Report (2019). Here, there is no reference to online violence. Yet, the governance framework that emerged from MeTooEP, which had almost five years to be updated, addresses here exclusively the forms of VAWIP that occur within the institution's physical world. In that way, leaving totally unaddressed a kind of violence that has been identified by female Italian MEPs as the most impactful experience.

²⁷⁷ Rules of Procedure (2024), Rule 183(1) p.105

4.5 Implementation Gap

This section tries to investigate the implementation gap emerging from the document corpus itself. Across the period chosen, to address the problem of VAWIP within the European Parliament's walls, the gap between the EP's formal commitment and its practical application is widely acknowledged by the institution itself, through official texts.

The basis was set again by IPU/PACE (2018) when documenting the EP's Advisory Committee paradox. At the time of publication, the Advisory Committee, whose aim was supposed to be responding to harassment complaints since 2012, didn't had imposed any sanctions against any MEPs, or better: << *There have not been any sanctions imposed against MEPs for sexual harassment to date.*>> ²⁷⁸. Despite the formal architecture was established: the Committee, the procedures and sanctions were not enough to produce any outcomes.

The reasons are disposed by IPU/PACE (2018) when making visible data about EP's reporting rates. << *Incidents involving sexual harassment were reported by 23.5 per cent of female parliamentarians and only 6 percent of female parliamentary staff*>> ²⁷⁹ adding explanations reported by participants, whose claimed:

<< *"I didn't report the incident because it would have been a sign of weakness. When you are in politics, you are supposed to be strong and handle anything."*>>²⁸⁰

<< *"Reporting sexual harassment further victimizes you"*>>²⁸¹

Then, in general, reporting is seen as a sign of weakness not compatible with agentic traits of the ideal politician, while party loyalty << *acts as a brake on disclosure and complaints*>>²⁸².

EP Resolution on Cyberviolence (2021) further added a new point of view to be added to the existing gap: the normalisation of not reporting cyberviolence. While, the EPRS (2021) assessed and quantified a range of costs: << *The economic assessment estimated the overall costs of cyber harassment and cyber stalking at between €49.0 and €89.3 billion*>> ²⁸³.

²⁷⁸ IPU/PACE (2018) p.16

²⁷⁹ IPU/PACE (2018) p.9

²⁸⁰ Ivi, p.10

²⁸¹ *Ibidem*

²⁸² Ivi, p.12

²⁸³ EPRS, p.6

Moreover, the resolution of 1st June 2023 represents the apex of institutional self-acknowledgment between the corpus. Using a direct language, it reveals: << *measures taken so far have been insufficient as harassment still occurs in all EU institutions, reporting remains low, victims are not assisted properly and the culture of impunity remains* >>²⁸⁴ documenting a specific failure through these words: << *several years on, very few of these concrete measures have been fully implemented and more needs to be done*>>²⁸⁵ adding that, Parliament's reforms after MeTooEP << *has been met with a certain degree of reluctance* >>²⁸⁶. Sustaining this thesis, the training completion rate of 36,9% , which corresponds to only 260 members over 705 MEPs, clearly translates the reluctance into reality. Even the sanction is explicitly claimed to be disproportionate to what violence concerns: the maximum penalty amount to one month suspension from activities.

While the 2024 reforms addressed some of these problems, they introduced new ambiguities as well. Rule 183(5) of the Rules of Procedure (2024) introduces requirement to declare that penalties << *shall be effective, proportionate and dissuasive*>>²⁸⁷ even if Resolution 2023 already demonstrated that previous sanctions were not proportionate. This actually raises the question of whether the 60 days proposal is proportionate to the harm documented in 2023. Moreover, the claim : << *training shall be completed within the first six months of the Member's term of office save in duly substantiated exceptional cases*>>²⁸⁸ also builds a procedural escape path, pointing to protect some "exceptional" case. Same, also the language used in Rule 10(8) (Rules of Procedures, 2024) stands at explicitly protecting the MEPs' freedom of speech during parliamentary debates, remained largely unchanged from the 2019's. It is actually this gap that continues creating the tension between the prohibited harassing conduct and the protection of the political sphere where those acts occur.

These points reveal that the implementation gap is a systemic feature of the European Parliament's approach to VAWIP. By formally recognising the problem, adopting instruments in response to external pressures and after having documented the failure of the same instruments it developed, it is possible to see that the culture of impunity we address to, could be the product of the governance itself.

²⁸⁴ EP Resolution on MeTooEP, Point H

²⁸⁵ Ivi, point K

²⁸⁶ Ivi, point H

²⁸⁷ Rules of Procedure (2024) Rule 183(5) p. 105

²⁸⁸ Code of Appropriate Behaviour (2024), Point 6

4.6 What the Documents Do not Mention

The chosen document corpus needs also an examination of what do these texts omit. In this specific case, probably, silences are as significant as the already mentioned content.

Three main absences are particularly important.

There is no treatment about online dimension from the normatives produced by the EP: the Corbett Report (2019), the Rules of Procedure and the Code of Appropriate Behaviour in both their versions 2019 and 2024 do not contain any reference to cyberviolence nor online threats. However, it is not correct to state that the EP does not care about the issue. The EP formally recognised cyberviolence as a structural threats to women's democratic participation in its Resolution (2021) when calling on Member States and documented about the silencing effects operating on women politicians. Despite this, the same institution that produced such a comprehensive legislature, at the same time maintained an internal governance that do not offer to its MEPs the same protection against the online sphere. As the interviews will show, this is actually the most identified form of violence affecting female Italian MEPs.

A second absence is unwanted physical contact, driven by paternalism. A bodily boundary violation that is often reported and experienced in institutional contexts. Here, no texts in the corpus mentions this specific form of gendered hostility, but its documental absence does not reflect the same from the institutional life. Interviews will confirm that.

Then, the last absence found is more structural. It is possible to document that no texts in the corpus ever mentioned the gendered distribution of institutional power. The horizontal segregation is something by which women are always affected: lower status committees, being excluded from high-politics debates and so on... just the Corbett Report (2019) introduced a sort of prohibition on single-gender committee disposition. Let's not justify horizontal segregation just because some women hold high profile positions.

These absences reveal to share a common logic: the EP's formal tools are designed to regulate what is visible, but these are not enough to address the informal and digital dimensions of VAWIP.

This chapter examined how the seven documents chosen, produced between 2018 and 2026, respond to VAWIP. To do this, five thematic categories have been determined, and some pattern emerged: while the empirical framework about VAWIP has grown a lot over the period, the EP's normative instruments just responded in a selective way, choosing to address

to visible forms of misconduct but leaving the subtler and the digital ones. Here, the most important findings from this document analysis was about what the documents admits or omits: the resolution of the 1st June 2023 constitutes, in this sense, an unprecedented act of self-admission by acknowledging that: the EP remains an unsafe workplace, that its reforms were met with reluctance and acknowledging the persistence of impunity culture. Notably, the implementation gap documented in this chapter is an institutional admission. From this starting point, Chapter 5 will examine the interview data by examining the dynamics that have been identified by this documentary recording into the new light of female Italian MEPs experiences.

5. Interviews Analysis

This fifth chapter will present the findings emerging from the semi-structured in depth interviews that were conducted with female Italian MEPs between April and May 2026. Here, it will be possible to better understand the dynamics identified within the institutional texts. Furthermore, it will investigate where do these documents fail to manifest in the real political experience of women holding office, particularly, within the European Parliament. Despite this thesis' limitations, interviews will demonstrate the formal gap between what the institutional texts formally say about VAWIP, and what female politicians actually experience. It will be possible to acknowledge how, in several areas, the interview data confirm what the documents report, while highlighting too much abstraction towards other issues. Above all, the online violence reported by Italian female MEPs was identified as the most impactful, even if it still is the least addressed dimension within the political framework.

The seven participants represent a diverse sample: they belong to different political parties, from the radical left to the central right. As the analysis will further demonstrate, this diversity is not producing so much divergence about reporting hostile dynamics, which means that the experiences described by respondents are consistent and structural. Differences then emerge when treating the adequacy of the institutional responses. The chapter will be built through different themes, following the Chapter 4. This is because interviews were conducted and based upon various themes found in the document analysis. Each section will open by assessing the patterns emerging from interviews, then, linking them with documentary findings, with the aim to identify if the lived experiences actually confirm or contradict what the institutions said.

5.1 Offline Forms of VAWIP

The offline dimension of Violence Against Women in Politics that emerges from the interviews data reveals to be more complex than it was supposed to be just by reading the document corpus. In general, participants describe the EP as a safer workplace than national or local environments. A perception that raises contradictions with the IPU/PACE (2018) and Zamfir (2025) data. However, what emerges is that the absence of open hostility cannot be taken as a mean for the absence of other forms of hostility: the interviews reveal a huge spectrum of subtle hostility, which is often normalised under the ‘cost of doing politics’ as a woman.

The most frequent pattern across the interviews is the persistent expectation for female MEPs to prove themselves suitable for politics, in ways that do not affect their male counterpart. There is a persistent expectation that female members should respond to. Alessandra Moretti, after nearly thirteen years of parliamentary experience, identified this phenomenon as a structural feature of the European Institution by saying:

“noi arriviamo, siamo tante fin tanto che non si arriva all'apice, ai vertici, è lì che il tetto di cristallo ci schiaccia la testa.” (A. Moretti)

Translation: [*“we get there, there are many of us until we reach the top, the apex, and that is where the glass ceiling crushes our heads”*]

By saying that, she observes how women are always well-represented at the base of the hierarchy, but here, the glass ceiling operates within the apex of that hierarchy. Georgia Tramacere said:

“Una donna, ancora oggi, si trova più spesso nella condizione di dover dimostrare di meritare quello spazio. Non è una regola scritta, ma è una dinamica che si ripresenta” (G. Tramacere)

[*“A woman, even today, should prove that she deserves that space. It is not a written rule, but it is a dynamic that keeps recurring”*]

While Giusi Princi, still belonging to the opposite political spectrum, said:

“Determinati stili di leadership o di comunicazione vengono percepiti in maniera diversa a seconda che siano espressi da una donna o da un uomo... le colleghe siano più frequentemente chiamate a dover dimostrare la propria autorevolezza” (G.Princi)

[“Certain leadership styles are perceived in a different way depending whether they are expressed by a woman or a man... female colleagues are more frequently called upon to prove their authority”]

Explaining how differences between men and women relay on interruptions and different time disposal when speaking. She identified also, a similar dynamic within the committee leadership distribution.

“Su 24 commissioni parlamentari solo 9 sono presiedute da donne” (G. Princi)

[“only nine of twenty-four committee chairs are held by women”]

Stressing that formal representation is not always translating into equivalent institutional power. More on this topic, Valentina Palmisano described her experience of being treated as a secondary choice: despite the formal rules developed to prevent it:

“Ci viene sempre da pensare che se fossimo uomini verremmo prese più in considerazione... invece a prima vista siamo sempre un po' di serie B” (V. Palmisano)

[“we are used to imagine us as men, maybe we would be taken more seriously... but at first impact we are always a plan B”]

However, the subtler forms of gendered hostility emerge in the interview with Cristina Guarda. Her reporting provides the most detailed experience of offline VAWIP. Guarda denounced being often addressed by her first name in professional contexts, spaces where her male colleagues were addressed by surname. According to her, a practice that is apparently trivial but significant in effect, as it signals a difference in the institutional authority allocation. Even more striking, she also mentioned two episodes of unwanted physical touch: a kiss on the forehead from a male colleague and a pat on the cheek, given immediately before a public appearance.

About the first episode she claimed:

“Un bacio sulla testa. Io mi sono pietrificata quella volta che un collega mi ha dato un bacio in testa... non sono nemmeno riuscita a perdonarmi il fatto di non aver avuto un'immediata reazione” (C. Guarda)

[“Time frozen when a colleague kissed me on the head... I could not even forgive myself for not having reacted immediately”]

This act produced a response of immediate paralysis. While, the second one produced a different reaction:

“nella stessa maniera in cui una persona mi ha dato il buffetto sulla guancia prima di un intervento...mi sono presa anch'io la libertà di darglielo a lui però, e si è stupito”(C. Guarda)

[“in the same way that a person patted on me on the cheek before an interview I was about to give.. I took the freedom of giving it back to him, and he was surprised”]

These episodes reveal about the institutional normalisation of behaviours driven by paternalism, a form of gendered hostility which is also entirely absent from the corpus. These gestures were driven offered from perpetrators as a sign of warmth and affection, but the experience evolved in violation of professional boundaries.

Guarda also addressed another form of exclusion. She documented to be recognized by male colleagues in her role of mother rather than as a politician. She said: *“hanno cominciato a ricordarmi per questo. La mamma... No, col cavolo, io sono una politica”* (C. Guarda).

[“they started remembering me for this. The mother... No, absolutely not — I am a politician”]

An hostile dynamic that evolves through the form of symbolic delegitimisation, something that is not captured from the Rules of Procedure nor the Code of Appropriate Behaviour.

In this sense, Annalisa Corrado reported a parallel dynamic about the questioning about family organization to female politicians. Questions such as:

“Come fai con i figli adesso che sei lontana?... Domande che gli uomini non fanno mai”
(A. Corrado)

[“How do you manage with your children now that you are away?... Questions that are never asked of men”]

As she noted, these are questions that are never directed to male politicians. A pattern that holds women into a double standard: the professional and the domestic accountability. Again, something that is not present in the corpus, but is alimented by Guarda's denied right to participate remotely to vote, during her maternity leave.

Moreover, Valentina Palmisano also added a new dimension that, in some ways, cuts across all the issues already described. Women in the EP are consistently invited to participate in

feminine topics such as gender equality, social rights or family issues. At the same time, women are systematically excluded from the high-level debates on high-politics: economy and security. She said:

“Le donne vengono quando si deve parlare appunto di violenza sulle donne, di libertà... non si inviterà mai una collega donna quando si vuole parlare di economia e finanza”
(V. Palmisano)

[“women are invited when the topic is violence against women or freedoms... he will never invite a female colleague when the topic is economic or finance”]

A pattern defines as thematic or horizontal segregation, confirmed again by palmisano when saying:

“Se ci sono degli eventi diciamo di più grande prestigio io noto che ci sono tutti uomini... io leggo la locandina e dico caspita non c'era una donna insomma che poteva avere qualcosa da dire” (V. Palmisano)

[“whenever there are prestigious events, I notice there are just men... looking at the program let me think: wasn't there any woman who had something to say?”]

Thematics which maps this thesis directly through the matter of committee's gendered distribution discussed in Chapter 2. Again, it finds no equivalence in the European Parliament's framework in the corpus.

The anonymous participant offered instead a perspective that diverges significantly from the pattern described above, and this is analytically significant exactly for that divergence. She explicitly rejected the EP being framed as a gendered hostile environment, arguing instead that the institution is primarily a competitive arena, where the value is measured by competence and determination, and not by gender. By saying:

“il valore di un deputato si misura sulle competenze, sulla determinazione e sulle battaglie che porta avanti, non sul genere” (MEP 7)

[“the value of a MEP is measured by competence, determination and the battles she fights, not by gender”]

despite this, she also acknowledged that women belonging to the political right are subjected to a specific form of delegitimation: conservative women are affected by the denial of solidarity and their representation define them as insufficiently feminist or subordinate to men's patterns. An accounts that confirm an identified pattern across documents. delegitimation does not operates just

through sexist hostility, but also through the policing of which forms of political identity are considered acceptable for women. In other words, her testimony suggest that boundaries of acceptable female political expression are contested by both, right and left sides.

Interview data collected within the scope of offline forms of VAWIP are then finding that the EP's formal governance tools only address visible hostility, leaving the subtle one normalised and structurally embedded. However, it also fill the gap with specific experiences that were named by the Italian female MEPs who accepted to be interviewed: the kiss on the forehead, the question about how to deal with childrens and so on... this is making so visible the institutional silences.

5.2 Online Dimension of Violence Against Women in Politics

Across the seven interviews, cyberviolence emerges as the most impactful and the least institutionally addressed form of VAWIP.

But, an observation is there necessary. The thematic categories developed in Chapter 4 to study the documental corpus, prove to be not as sufficient when applied to interview data. Yet, participant's experiences reveal a more complex panorama. This thesis is then acknowledging this limitation, but it also treating it with method. The fact that interviews data exceed the thematic categories is itself a finding! This suggest that the existing framework to understand VAWIP within the parliamentary context is not enough compared to the complexity of the phenomenon.

What follows attempt to understand this complexity by addressing the five categories, both where they show and where they constrain something.

Respondents from parties like GUE/NGL, the Greens, S&D and the EPP described online gendered violence as an evergreen of their political lives. What makes it gendered is the nature of the target: female politicians. Here, political criticism blends with gendered positions and the outcome reveals to be engaging with domestic role or sexuality. Giusi Princi defined this idea so clearly:

“quando la critica entra nel merito delle idee, delle posizioni e delle scelte politiche, anche se dura o incisiva, rimane comunque confronto democratico. Diverso è invece il caso in cui si colpisce la persona uscendo dal contenuto politico, spesso utilizzando toni sessisti e riferimenti espliciti al genere” (G. Princi)

[“When criticism addresses ideas, positions and political choices, even if harsh, it remains democratic debate. Different is the case when the person is targeted outside political content, often using sexist tones and explicit references to gender”]

Even the anonymous respondent MEP 7, whose assessment of the EP’s institutional environment was the most sceptical of any gendered problem, confirmed the gendered character of online attacks as:

“contro le donne politiche l'insulto si sposta molto più facilmente sul piano personale, estetico o legato alla sfera privata, rispetto a quanto avvenga per i colleghi uomini” (MEP 7)
[“against women politicians the insult shifts much more easily onto the personal, aesthetic or private sphere, compared to what happens with male colleagues”]

The gendered nature of online violence is acknowledged even by those who reject the broader feminist framing.

However, the widest account of online violence comes from Alessandra Moretti’s experience. She has been targeted with the most extreme form of cyberviolence. She discovered hundreds of her photos taken from her social profiles along with hundreds deepfakes, that were published on a website without her consent. [Phica.eu](#)²⁸⁹, which is actually blocked. As she commented:

“Ho sperimentato di tutto, soprattutto per quanto riguarda la violenza digitale.” (A. Moretti)
[“I have experienced everything, above all when it comes to digital violence”]

And she also reported receiving threats targeting her children:

“Tra le minacce che io ricevevo c'era anche quella non solo di essere sfregiata con l'acido ma che i miei figli morissero” (A. Moretti)
[“Among the threats I received was not only being scarred with acid but that my children would die”]

Among her descriptions of online comments, sexual assault and coordinated attacks. She has been targeted by gang rape threats and demands for sexual submission:

²⁸⁹ [Phica.eu](#) was a website where thousand photographs of public figures (mostly women) were found. Photos were posted without their consent and often they came along with sexually explicit comments. The website was officially blocked after being operating within many European countries.

“Torna in cucina gallina, chiudi la bocca... taci puttana, non puoi parlare, tenere la bocca aperta se non fai pompini... incitamento anche allo stupro di gruppo” (A. Moretti)

[“Get back to your kitchen, shut your mouth... shut up you whore, you cannot speak, keep your mouth open only for giving blowjobs... incitements to gang rape as well”]

But these are not isolated incidents. Corrado added:

“Ti attaccano per una cosa che hai fatto o hai detto a livello politico... però poi nel modo in cui ti attaccano il contenuto diventa totalmente irrilevante e invece l'attacco si svolge tutto su... i canoni estetici piuttosto che sull'insulto sessista del tipo, appunto, 'troia'” (A. Corrado)

[“They attack you for something you have done or said at a political level... but then, the way in which they attack you, the content becomes totally irrelevant and instead the attack is entirely focused on... aesthetic standards, or on the sexist insult like, well, “whore””]

While Palmisano noted:

“Mi è capitato di ricevere dei commenti come per dire ma perché non stai a casa a cucinare... occuparti dei tuoi figli invece di parlare di politica” (V. Palmisano)

[“I received comments like: why don't you stay at home and cook.. take care of your children instead of talking about politics”]

Moretti also described a specific case. Here, a famous political opponents paid a lot of money to flood her social media pages with hostile comments. In that case, online violence was also used as a political strategy. She added:

“Meno donne partecipano a una vita politica del nostro paese e meno gli uomini devono concorrere rispetto alle intelligenze femminili” (A. Moretti)

[“The fewer women participate in the political life of our country, the less men have to compete with female intelligence”]

Georgia Tramacere, the most recent elected respondent, brought a specific dimension into the discussion. Linking with what happened to Alessandra Moretti, Tramacere identified AI generated images (deepfakes) as the emerging most damaging form of image-abuse. In doing this, she linked a specific case occurring in 2025 which led to a broader legislative effort to prohibit these subtle systems. She reported:

“Lo abbiamo visto anche in casi recenti[...] i cosiddetti deepfake, che hanno colpito donne impegnate nella vita pubblica e istituzionale. È su questo terreno che oggi si gioca una

partita importante anche a livello europeo.

Nel lavoro parlamentare sull'intelligenza artificiale è stato introdotto un principio molto chiaro: il divieto dei cosiddetti "nudifier", sistemi di IA che generano o manipolano immagini intime di persone reali senza consenso. È un segnale forte, perché riconosce che la violenza digitale non è un effetto collaterale della tecnologia, ma un problema reale che incide direttamente sulla libertà di esporsi e partecipare." (G. Tramacere)

[“We have seen this in recent cases too [...] the so-called deepfakes, which have targeted women engaged in public and institutional life. It is on this terrain that an important battle is now being fought at European level as well. In the parliamentary work on artificial intelligence, a very clear principle was introduced: the prohibition of so-called 'nudifiers', AI systems that generate or manipulate intimate images of real people without consent. It is a strong signal, because it recognises that digital violence is not a side effect of technology, but a real problem that directly affects the freedom to be visible and to participate”]

Her testimony reflects a dynamic already identified in the documentary corpus, the EP is legislating cyberviolence as an external problem.

Corrado, Guarda and Palmisano, even if describing less extremes forms of online violence than Moretti, are still confirming the same structural pattern. Corrado identifies dynamics of organised disinformation perpetrated by specific political opponents, as out of context statements and fake news targeting her. Guarda, because of her technical portfolio, is the one who described herself as probably the less exposed to the online dimension. Despite this, she reported hostile comments behind her videos online, adding that:

“Quello che a me preoccupa moltissimo è come persone che sono anche formalmente, e da un punto di vista mediatico, estremamente rispettose e rispettabili, invece nei rapporti personali mancano di rispetto” (C. Guarda)

[“What I’m enormously concerned about is how people who are formally, and from a media perspective, extremely respectful and respectable, in personal interactions lack respect entirely”]

This is actually an inversion of the expected relationship between online and offline, pointing to a normalisation of the institutional paternalism discussed above. While, Palmisano, identifies the most triggering topics that influence gendered online attacks: LGBTQIA+ rights, social freedoms, violence, women’s rights...

“I post che hanno scatenato di più questa forma di violenza sono stati quelli relativi quando ho parlato di libertà di diritti LGBT... si sono scatenati dei commenti per dire ma stai zitta”
(V. Palmisano)

[“The posts that triggered this form of violence the most were those related to when I spoke about LGBT rights and freedoms... comments would erupt telling me to shut up”]

In particular, these topics typically associated with progressive political positions are highly attacked. This suggests that online violence function not just as misogyny, but also as a mechanism that is used to suppress certain political agendas.

Furthermore, there are two structural points of the conducted interviews that deserve attention: the source of online violence and the absence of a formal institutional response that was specifically designed to address the problem. In contrary to the offline violence that specifically originates from within the institution, cyberviolence comes from outside: citizens and political opponents are classified to be the main perpetrators. In this sense, Moretti specifically said:

“All'interno del Parlamento Europeo c'è una policy molto severa... Per l'online no, lì è ancora lontana la strada che dobbiamo fare” (A. Moretti)

[The European Parliament has a very strict policy... But for the online, no, we still have a long way to go]

Her distinction is crucial. She explicitly said that the EP's formal governance framework is designed to regulate conduct within the institutions' physical space, which is almost irrelevant when addressing the most damaging form of violence affecting female Italian MEPs. Moreover, there are no institutional responses that are specific to fix online violence. Every respondent noted that the well established mechanisms do not extend to the online sphere.

Palmisano was direct by saying: *“Ad oggi non mi risulta che ci siano degli interventi in questo senso così settoriali così mirati”* (V. Palmisano)

[As of today, I am not aware of any interventions in this sense that are so targeted]

This is a proof of the institutional silence already mentioned in Chapter 4, here confirmed by the experience of the MEPs who decided to participate. It is exactly this institutional silence that constitutes a striking finding for this thesis: the EP, the institution that produced ambitious legislative tools to address gender-based cyberviolence across the world, has not extended its logic to protect its Members.

5.3 Behavioural Responses and Silencing Effect

The behavioural consequences of VAWIP across the sample of Italian female MEPs interviewed, emerge in a continuum with what presented before. The full spectrum of female politicians, due to the exposure of online or offline VAWIP, has reproduced a change in political behaviour, while, the silencing effect reveals to be a concrete experience.

The most direct account of behavioural modification comes from Moretti. She described a temporal withdrawal due to the increased online violence against her:

“Sì l’ho fatto... quando tu sei fragile e sei più debole... la cosa che ti viene naturale è quella di dire << senti, fermati per un po’ >>” (A. Moretti)

[“Yes, I did it... when you are fragile and weaker... the natural thing is to say: << okay, let’s stop for a while >>”]

A response coming from the MEP with the longest experience within the sample. Moretti was so explicit in reporting a temporary retreat, and considering herself as someone who feels responsible to set as the example, this should be significantly remarkable. Moretti is the respondent who most explicitly exposed herself as someone who is always trying to denounce and to report hostile behaviours. This specific point, where she acknowledges having reached a temporary retreating point, should raise some questions about what could happen to someone who does not share her institutional experience and tenacity.

On the other hand, Corrado described the behavioural modification mechanism with much precision. By confirming the trend, she reported the thought that precedes every public intervention as an assessment of speaking costs, along with the available energies to absorb what that decision may reserve.

“Ci sono quelle cose che lo sai già che porteranno dietro un peso, quindi dipende da quanti pesi stai sopportando in quel momento... magari su cose minori sì” (A. Corrado)

[“There are things you already know will carry a weight behind them, so it depends on how many weights you are carrying at that moment... on minor things, yes”]

Self-censorship is understood as a continuum, something that male colleagues, as she after implied, are not assumed to feel. And again, she added:

“Non faccio fatica a pensare che una poi prima di dire una cosa ci pensa due volte... sapendo che poi deve passare di nuovo per quel calvario che oggettivamente non è gratuito emotivamente” (A. Corrado)

[“I have no problems imagining that, before saying something, a woman could think it twice... knowing that she will pass through all those things, this is not emotionally costless”]

Notably, she also identified that as an energetic cost, afterall:

“È un affaticamento che sicuramente è una sottrazione di energia quindi alla fine modifica il comportamento” (A. Corrado)

[“It is a fatigue that is certainly a subtraction of energy, and so, in the end, it let you modify your behaviour”]

Moreover, Guarda reported a specific form of adaptation, in response to that physical paternalism that drove the forehead kiss. She described her developing physical distance: for example, she started presenting her hand first, a mechanism directed to distancing. Furthermore, she also reported having modified her communicative style, in response to earlier experiences:

“Probabilmente ho cercato di trovare altre maniere per comunicare, mentre forse il mio modo naturale di comunicare questi temi è più concentrato su una logica che sia sia tecnica ma anche emozionale... e invece sono andata più verso toni diplomatici e istituzionali” (C. Guarda)

[“Probably, I tried to find other ways to communicate, whereas perhaps my natural way of communicating these topics is more focused on a logic that is both technical and emotional... instead I moved towards more diplomatic and institutional tones”]

Guarda is then describing a particular form of self-censorship. She is not suppressing its own words, rather, she abandoned her authenticity and her political expression due to hostile attacks. However, Guarda did not stop speaking, she just stopped being totally herself.

For what concerns Palmisano, she tried to describe likely the same dynamic, even if in different terms:

“A lungo andare si può anche fare influenzare da queste, da questa cultura quindi magari cerca sempre di essere un po' un posto indietro, di essere di vivere un po' l'ombra degli altri”
(V, Palmisano)

[“Over time you can also be influenced by this culture, so perhaps you always try to be a step behind, to live a little in the shadow of others”]

Palmisano described also the same hesitation but related to public speaking during meetings. The dynamic of hiding behind someone else, trying to occupy less institutional space, is identified with the silencing effects explained in the corpus. She reported to think it twice before taking her turn within a public intervention due to constant judging tension they are victims of:

“Facciamo fatica per esempio se siamo in un meeting magari ci pensiamo due volte ad esprimere la nostra idea per paura che magari qualcuno possa sminuirci” (V. Palmisano)

[“We struggle, for example, in a meeting, we think twice before expressing our idea for fear that someone might belittle us”]

Yet, whether the documents reveal that silencing effect as an outcome that need to be investigated, here, this manifestate as a daily contribution. But, this is not the only emotional dimension that has been reported. Moretti, instead, pointed *burnout* as a concrete outcome of a sustained online violence, she said: *“Degli esaurimenti nervosi che portano le donne a dire <<non ce la faccio più, mi fermo>>”* (A. Moretti)

[“Burnouts that lead women to claim <<I cannot do this anymore, I need to stop>>”]

This particular mechanism is understood as the first through which political violence operates in removing women from politics, allowing their drop out. In this sense, Cristina Guarda's interview gave a precise framework of female politicians' psychological steps when effected to such behaviour. She reported the paralysis after the unwanted touch, the self recrimination for not being able to react in that moment, as well as the consequential development of new strategies to prevent new acts to affect herself. She justified:

“Ho dovuto assumere questo ruolo un po' più distaccato, meno anche condivisivo, meno amichevole. Non è corretto che io debba fare questi passi indietro” (C. Guarda)

[“I had to take on a more detached role, less sharing, less friendly. It is not right that I should take these steps back”]

Female Italian MEPs have reshaped their political behaviour in favour of a more secure experience within the political sphere of the EP. Women reported having modified their emotional register to avoid being derided, they also reported having taken into account the supposed energetic costs right before taking the decision whether to speak or not. What the interviews reveal, even if it is not captured by documents, is that the silencing effect reflects as an erosion. It erodes spontaneity and freedom. The women that accepted to participate to this research have not been silenced, but in some ways they all have learned how to modify themselves, becoming smaller.

5.4 Institutional Responses

Across the respondents there is a common agreement about the fact that the European Parliament has made measurable progresses in establishing a formal governance framework to fix VAWIP. Notably, the same broad agreement relay on the lack in addressing the forms of violence that female MEPs are daily experiencing.

Specifically, the anti-harassment training that was introduced at the beginning of the present legislation is the one that receive notably positive evaluation from female Italian MEPs. Palmisano described it as something she really appreciates, she added:

“La prima cosa che ci hanno fatto fare è stato un corso di formazione... io l'ho apprezzata dico davvero molto.” (V. Palmisano)

[“the first thing we had was a training course.. I genuinely appreciated it”]

Corrado, from her point of view described the course as well-designed and professional:

“Sono rimasta molto favorevolmente colpita sul fatto che all'inizio della legislatura tutti noi abbiamo fatto obbligatoriamente un corso anti-harassment... ben fatto, con delle persone preparate” (A. Corrado)

[“I was very impressed by the mandatory anti-harassment course at the beginning of the term... it was well-designed and held by qualified people”]

Positive evaluation that contrast with past data from the Resolution of 1st June 2023, when assessing that just 36.9% of MEPs had completed the voluntary version of the same training. This transition from voluntary to mandatory participation is then, maybe, showing one of the most consequential reforms of the post MeTooEP campaign.

On the other hand, Guarda offered a more sceptical idea. Yet acknowledging the existence of these courses, she noted that these are not always taken seriously as they should.

“Ce li avrebbe, ma non vengono presi seriamente: per esempio ci sono dei corsi molto interessanti per evitare di generare climi di molestia tra parlamentari e collaboratori però non vengono seguiti con particolare attenzione a parer mio” (C. Guarda)

[“EP has the tools, but these are not taken seriously. For example, there are very interesting courses to prevent harassment between parliamentarians and staff. But, in my opinion, these are not followed with particular attention.”]

It is right this great divergence between reporting that is interesting. This may also reflect differences based on political groups affiliation, or political group culture as well. But it may also highlight personal experiences during the training courses or the extent to which the training translates into personal experiences and behavioural changes.

However, the most ambivalent picture emerges when speaking about reporting mechanisms. Participants acknowledge the existence of formal channels where to report hostile behaviour, between these: the Advisory Committee, the mediation office and even political group’s confidential counsellors. But, some structural barriers are also mentioned when describing what usually prevent the usage of these channels.

About these latter, Corrado said: *“Quando tu fai una denuncia, già sai che ti infili in un tritacarne... c’è anche lì una soglia energetica che devi superare” (A. Corrado)*

[“when you complain, you already know what you are going to be affected of... here, as well, these is an energetic threshold you have to overcome”]

The mincer metaphor is revealing. Reporting mechanisms are not seen as a totally safe channels, but often they add concerns. here, Palmisano identified almost the same dynamic, but from a different basis. She noted that tools exist, but these are not used at full capacity. This is not women’s fault, rather, the reason relay on the normalisation of such experiences,

that are no more recognised as reportable. An observation that points into documentary findings about underreporting being sustained also by the normalisation of harassment, and not just by the fear of retaliation.

“Credo ci siano tutta una fascia di cose che magari si subiscono ma non si tende a segnalarle perché alla fine si classificano episodi così normali” (V. Palmisano)

[“I think there is a whole range of things that are perhaps endured but not reported, because, in the end these are classified as normal episodes”]

This normalisation culture is moving the threshold of what female MEPs think about their experiences as being bad. What emerges, is the vulnerability of APAs and staff members, a recurrent concern between MEPs.

Both Corrado and Guarda identified the power asymmetry between MEPs and their staff as a structural barrier to reporting mechanism. Corrado, explicitly said:

“Se tu sei un assistente e il tuo datore di lavoro ha un comportamento scorretto, è chiaro che se tu lo segnali...” (C. Guarda)

[“If you are an assistant and your employer behaves improperly, it is clear that if you report it...”]

A conclusion that does not need to be stated. The precarious employment of APAs, which was documented in the second chapter, is here confirmed. It creates a structural condition of vulnerability for someone, and what is even more important, is that reporting mechanism cannot fix it. In this sense, even is not specifically addressing to staff members, Giusi Princi identified accessibility and credibility as the real challenges in using reporting channels, stressing that it is not just a matter of existence.

“La vera sfida oggi non sia soltanto quella di disporre di strumenti normativi, ma di renderli sempre più efficaci, tempestivi e soprattutto realmente accessibili e percepiti come tali da chi subisce le violazioni” (G. Princi)

[“the real challenge today is not just having tools, rather, is to make them increasingly effective, fast and, above all, genuinely accessible and perceived as such by those who are targeted”]

An observation that carries some weight due to its source: Princi is the participant who is more sympathetic to the EP's formal framework. Yet, even those who strongly believe in the EP's system are perceiving some kind of unaccessibility for those who need it. Notably, what the interview data reveals is that the EP's formal framework is mostly appreciated, but when it does not reach the most common forms of VAWIP occurring today and targeting female Italian MEPs. MEP 7 offered here the most focused assessment of EP's mechanism. She acknowledged the existence of strict regulations and mandatory trainings, but she stressed the importance of impartiality:

“la cosa più importante è che tali meccanismi funzionino sempre in modo imparziale, garantendo la tutela delle vittime e la certezza delle procedure, senza diventare strumenti di ritorsione politica” (MEP 7)

[“the most important thing is that these mechanisms always function impartially, guaranteeing the protection of victims and procedural certainty, without becoming instruments of political retaliation”]

A concern that adds a new dimension to the implementation gap that emerges from documents. She proposed the risk that the credibility of anti-harassment procedures will be undermined for some political reasons, like instrumentalisation.

Trainings helps addressing the internal conduct, while the reporting mechanisms address internal incidents, the sanctions, then, are directed to internal perpetrators...but none of these instruments reaches the online dimension that comes from outside the EP, nor internal microaggressions and structural power asymmetries. Moreover, there is another institutional gap that deserves attention. The mandatory anti-harassment training is directed to every MEPs, as functioning primarily as awareness raising for potential victims, more than as a mechanism for safety.

5.5 Implementation Gap

The Implementation gap that was identified in Chapter 4 found here its confirmation. The distance between what the institution formally point at, and what female Italian MEPs experience is not entirely acknowledged, however, what interviews add to that research are not different things, rather, a different register. For example, where the Resolution of 1st June 2023 describes the gap in the language of the institutional self-assessment, here, the MEPs describe it in a language driven by experience.

Palmisano is the one who gives the most precise formulation of the gap. She observed the relationship between rules and people:

“Le regole sono interpretate dalle persone, cioè le persone vedono una donna accanto a un uomo e pensano che la donna non sia una collega ma un membro dello staff. E poi le regole possono servire a poco” (V. Palmisano)

[“The rules are interpreted by people, if someone sees a woman next to a man and thinks the woman is not a colleague but a staff member. Rules can do very little”]

This is something that the document corpus cannot catch. The implementation gap is not just an EP’s design failure, rather, it is a failure concerning culture. Rules that formally prohibit discrimination cannot do anything if the automatic assumption of people, when looking at a young woman next to a sixty-years old MEP, is about her being a staff member and not a MEP too. In this sense, it is a matter of culture because assumptions operates besides consciousness. Moreover, a further dimension acknowledged by Corrado identifies a new shadow in the gap. By acknowledging existing reporting mechanisms, in her reporting at page 147, she also acknowledge the victims requirement for emotional resilience. The “tritacarne” and the energetic threshold she mentioned, are not mentioned anywhere in the Rules of Procedures, nor in the Code of Appropriate Behaviour or the Advisory Committee procedures. The matter is: the formal channels exist, but the cost of using them is often inaccessible.

Guarda spread the most pessimistic assessment. She reported that no normative reform can be addressed until...

“ma se non si agisce da un punto di vista culturale, cioè, per quanto tu possa mettere delle regole, ci sarà sempre comunque un desiderio di prevaricazione maschile, una paura maschile che renderà tutti questi passaggi inapplicabili” (C. Guarda)

[“if we do not act from a cultural point of view, it does not matter how many rules we put in place, there will always be a male desire for domination, a male fear that will make these steps inapplicable”]

She directly maps into the feminist Institutionalism framework which was illustrated before, in Chapter 2. FI define formal rules as repeatedly absorbed by informal norms they were designed to challenge. This culture will then produce a layering effect which is neutralising every new governance instrument. This is where Guarda's thought converge with Princi's one that it is possible to assess that the idea of formal framework's inadequacy is not just a leftist perception. EPP's members agreeing, suggests the structural reality. Notably, the MEP 7 identified cultural change as the primary prerequisite for meaningful improvements.

“il miglioramento principale deve essere culturale, non solo normativo” (MEP 7)

[“the main improvement must be cultural, not only normative”]

The convergence between guarda and MEP 7 on this point, suggest that the limits of formal governance are recognised across the entire political spectrum, even where they differ in understanding the problem.

Then, interviews data reveals that implementation gap operates in multiple levels at the same time. Formal mechanism do not extend to cyberviolence, the form of VAWIP which has been identified as the most impactful by female Italian MEPs. The personal energetic and reputational cost of using formal channels makes them often unavailable for many people and, the informal norms that still help sustaining gendered hostility within institutions are not addressable through formal governance instruments. These are designed to address to visible conduct mostly.

The interview data here analysed do not contradict what emerged from the documentary analysis of Chapter 4. But the interviews do more than just confirming what the documents both disposed and omitted: they give an institutional narrative that is not accessible just through texts. Between the findings, made available thanks to the interview analysis, there are: the fact that the EP is seen as a comparatively safer institutional environment than the national and the local political contexts, the common identification of online violence as the most impactful form of VAWIP and the fact that these dynamics convergence across different

political affiliations of the interviewed MEPs. The Conclusions will take these points together, going back to the research questions that drove this thesis.

6. Conclusions

This thesis' settled aim was to investigate how Violence Against Women in Politics operates within the European Parliament. Trying to understand which VAWIP mechanisms are able to shape female MEPs' agency and how the Institution responds.

The main Research Question that drove this research asked *How does Violence Against Women in Politics operate within the EP, and through which mechanisms does it shape the political agency and the political participation of female Members of the European Parliament?*

The answer that emerges from these analysis is that it operates through two different lines: within the Institution and outside the Institution. Inside the EP, violence targeting female Members of the EU Parliament has not disappeared, rather, it has changed. the overt and visible forms of gendered hostility that characterised previous institutional terms have been displaced through formal reforms and pressure. However, such forms have been replaced by subtler and more normalised behaviours, which are harder to highlight and name, but these are also harder to report. The forehead kiss, the questions about how to manage children and housework, being mistaken for an assistant and being called to speak just on soft policies are examples of reproduced institutional subordination. Clearly, these are not inconveniences, but the contemporary version of the structural phenomenon described by the Galtung's triangle of violence described in Chapter 2: when direct violence becomes, in some ways, acceptable, it does not disappear but moves into institutional cultural forms that start reproducing the same mechanisms.

Outside of the Institution means the online sphere. Every respondent in this thesis reported having experienced some kind of online violence, and everyone described it as gendered. Gendered online attacks generally rely on body sculpture, domestic roles and women's sexuality. Female Italian MEPs reported having received death threats and rape threats, also targeting their families. Someone found hundreds of her nudes online while others had been subject to coordinated hate campaigns funded by opponents. Furthermore, this online dimension is not a supplement of the already existing institutional ones, rather, it is worst. it is more intense and less addressed, it follows them once at home and persecutes them everyday.

Three subordinate research questions drove the analysis, each one addressing a different point of view. The first sub-RQ asked: *what forms of VAWIP do female MEPs experience, and how does the online dimension intersect with the institutional context?* Findings clearly suggest that the two dimensions described above are converging as they deploy the same legitimising logic. Both internal and external violence target women's bodies and their sexuality, rather than their political position, but they do it across different spaces, online and offline. A clear example is highlighted by the continuity between the subtle paternalism experienced inside the institution, and the explicit sexual violence experienced online, because VAWIP is not attacking women for what they do, but for what they are: women, with the aim to discourage them from holding political power. Documents identify offline VAWIP mainly as visible hostile behaviour or offensive language, while the online dimension became a serious concern just after the 2021 Resolution on Cyberviolence. Despite this, no EP's internal documents address the online dimension as an Institutional problem.

On this basis, interviews revealed a more complex picture. MEPs described many experiences that exceed the thematic categories. Among these: discrimination, horizontal segregation, exclusion and inappropriate behaviour have been reported. As expected, online violence emerged as the most impactful form, as every respondent reported having experienced gendered cyberviolence coming from outside the institution's walls.

The second asked: *how does VAWIP shape female MEPs' political behaviour, visibility and political engagement?* Documents acknowledge the silencing effect, in particular, IPU/PACE (2018) document female MPs self-censorship and modified visibility above all. But the documentation comes from the internal EP as well, as the 2021 Resolution identifies the chilling effects as a democratic problem. What emerges from interview data is that the silencing effect created by VAWIP is so concrete and affects all the political affiliations. Every participant reported having modified their communicative register in some ways, trying to avoid derision and hostile answers. Someone reported having started calculating the energetic cost needed, right before every public intervention, while others temporarily withdrew from public visibility because it was overwhelming. Others defined online violence as unsustainable while someone developed physical strategies to prevent unwanted touches. What emerges is that none of these reported adaptations appear in the EP's formal framework and the reasons rely on the nature of the framework itself. The EP's governance framework is designed to prohibit conduct, then it is not addressing any adaptive response driven by sustained hostility.

And the last sub-question asked: *How do institutional responses and reporting mechanisms affect both the persistence of VAWIP and women's trust in institutional protection?*

the document analysis shows the absence of harassment-specific traces before the MeTooEP advent and the consequential, but still insufficient, framework proposed by the 2024 framework. Despite this, the answer emerging from interviews is that the European parliament's formal mechanisms are generally acknowledged and even appreciated, despite this, these are also perceived as significantly short in addressing forms of violence that affect MEPs the most. Examples of appreciation can be found in the mandatory anti-harassment training, which has been positively evaluated by multiple respondents. On the other hand, reporting mechanisms are described as costly to use, not in terms of money but as inaccessible for those most vulnerable, due to institution's procedural mechanism. After all, the implementation gap highlighted by the institutional corpus of documents has been confirmed from those women that the formal framework is aimed to protect.

The Paradox

The central finding of this research is not about the existence of VAWIP within the European Parliament, rather, it is the EP's paradox existence confirmation. The EP embodies the Institution which has produced some of the most ambitious legislative tools to address gender-based cyber violence, despite this, it has not extended this logic to protect its own Members. Notably, the EP has managed the issue as an external agenda. this structural blind spot has been confirmed directly by MEPs: Alessandra Moretti said

“All'interno del Parlamento Europeo c'è una policy molto severa... Per l'online no, perché è ancora lontana la strada che dobbiamo fare” (A. Moretti)

[“Inside the European Parliament there is a very strict policy... For online, no, because we still have a long way to go”]

In this sense, in 2024 the Institution called on Member States to criminalise deepfakes, that establishing more accessible reporting mechanisms, made no reference about the online dimension of VAWIP into its internal governance documents. In other words, the EP, that formally prohibited harassment in 2019 and doubled its sanctions in 2024, today has poor instruments to address the violence that occurs through a smartphone. Palmisano captured the consequences of this gap:

“Le regole sono interpretate dalle persone, cioè le persone vedono una donna accanto ad un uomo e pensando che la donna non sia una collega ma un membro dello staff. E poi, le regole possono servire a poco.” (V. Palmisano)

[“the rules are interpreted by people — people see a woman next to a man and think the woman is not a colleague but a staff member. And then the rules can do very little”].

No governance reform addresses the assumption that precedes it.

This is the gap interviewed MEPs live with, everyday. This very gap had been explained in Chapter 2 through the Feminist Institutionalism framework, by claiming: formal rules are always absorbed by informal cultural norms they were designed to challenge. Each internal advance after the MeTooEP reform, even if establishing mandatory training or strengthening sanctions, still left intact the institutional culture. This latter, is what actually sustains the gendered hostility and the subtle forms of VAWIP.

It has been addressed as a layering effect: every new governance instrument that has been formulated to address the previous failures, always started creating new silences, or, as Annalisa Corrado said:

“Quando tu fai una denuncia già sai che ti infili in un tritacarne un po” (A. Corrado)

[“When you file a complaint you already know you are entering a kind of mincer”]

A formal framing that is perceived as vulnerable even from the most institutionally aligned perspective, the one MEP 7, who said:

“la cosa più importante è che tali meccanismi funzionino sempre in modo imparziale... senza diventare strumenti di ritorsione politica” (MEP 7)

[“the most important thing is that these mechanisms always function impartially... without becoming instruments of political retaliation”]

Research Contributions to Literature

This thesis brings some contributions to existing literature on VAWIP. By providing empirical evidence from the EP’s inside, it shows that the transformation from clear to more subtle forms of violence, identified by Krook and Restrepo Sanin, is real. The interview analysis clearly demonstrate how gendered hostility regularly adapts to formal prohibitions without disappearing, yet, such hostility become normalised, less visible and migrates to the digital.

Furthermore, this thesis also demonstrated how the digital dimension is not as separate as it is thought to be from other forms of VAWIP. In contrast, the digital revealed to be a structural extension of the institutional gendered hostility.

The logic that produces paternalism inside the EP, is the same that address sexual threats online: both are expressions of resistance to women's political presence that Krook and Restrepo Sanín identify as the defining characteristic of VAWIP, operating across different spaces with the same end.

Another contribution this thesis can offer, concerns the application of FI to the specific case of the European Parliament in the post MeTooEP period. Here, the findings confirm the theoretical framework developed by Berthet and Kantola (2021): formal rules are absorbed by informal norms they were designed to challenge. In this sense, those produce a layering effect generating new silences. The 2024 Rules of procedure represent here the most recent pattern by genuinely advancing training and sanctions while keeping silent the online dimension that everyone in this study described as a daily experience.

Moreover, this thesis also shows the value of the combination between document analysis and interview analysis, specifically when addressing institutional phenomena. In order, documents reveal what the institution says, while interviews reveal what women really experience. This gap reflects how institutions manage the appearance of addressing a problem, while leaving its structural causes intact. Participants from GUE/NGL, the Greens, S&D, EPP and Patriots for Europe, on the specific point of online violence's gendered character, described the same dynamics. The convergence between different parties affiliation in this thesis shows that the implementation gap is not a critique from the lefties, rather, it reflects an EP's structural feature which is everyday experienced by its female Members, no matter where they sit.

Recommendations

The findings here exposed, suggest many concrete areas where the European Parliament's approach to gender-based violence could be strengthened.

The most urgent recommendation concerns the online dimension: the **EP should develop its own internal instruments to support MEPs experiencing online violence**. For example, the log of the 2021 cyberviolence resolution and the AI Act should be extended toward the inside, with the aim to protect MEPs as well. Between the many forms it could take: a

reporting mechanism for cyberviolence that differ from existing procedures. This could allow Members to report online attacks without entering a full disciplinary procedure for example.

Furthermore, the **accessibility of existing reporting mechanisms need to be extended**. As mentioned by respondents, formal channels are often inaccessible, due to many reasons. In this sense, the EP should consider a different threshold support mechanism that does not need a formal complaint to be “used”. There could be also confidential counsellors with specific mandate to support Members, not just the staff, and also a simplified reporting experience that does not need a full disciplinary procedure.

A third recommendation could be **addressing the structural vulnerability of APAs**. The power asymmetry between them and their MEPs still creates vulnerability concerns. There should be an exploration into new new reforms for APAs employment model, trying to dissimulate that closeness from individual MEPs.

However, the most important but also most difficult outcome to reach is **addressing the cultural dimension of VAWIP**, the one that the formal governance tolls cannot reach. The mandatory anti-harassment training introduced in 2024, revealed to be as necessary as insufficient. What is needed, instead, is an institutional investment in cultural change, the one Cristina Guarda identified as the prerequisite for any meaningful reform to be made. Yet, an investment to address informal norms and the normalised microaggressions that governance framework are unable to see.

Limitations and Further Research

As already acknowledged in Chapter 3, this thesis has several limitations. The sample made of seven Italian female MEPs cannot entirely represent the full range of experiences within a 720 member institution. In this particular case, the choice to exclusively focus on Italian MEPs was justified by methodological and timely grounds. This means that findings reflect a culturally specific perspective that may not translate directly to MEPs from other Member States. Then, the mixed interview format, made of four oral semi-structured in-depth interviews and three written questionnaires, for sure produced asymmetries in spontaneity of the data. Future research could also extend this comparative dimension by examining experiences of female MEPs from other Nations as well, particularly within those Member States with different national gender equality frameworks.

Here, seven women agreed to speak with a student researcher about their professionally and personally sensitive experiences. They come from different ends of the political spectrum but they describe nearly the same dynamics, used the same language and reached almost the same conclusions. From the sample, nobody denied the existence of VAWIP as a phenomenon and several expressed gratitude for asking, even those who, due to the political agenda, had not been able to participate. This is primarily a finding, and maybe it is the most important one. However, one participant chose to remain anonymous, a choice that is itself significant.

Despite the EP has made measurable progress in addressing VAWIP since MeTooEP, even in terms of cyberviolence, the gap this thesis acknowledge has not been closed. To close this gap we need more than just rules, it will require the EP to extend the same logic it applied outward, but toward the inside. In this way it will be possible to protect its own Members from online hostile behaviours they are affected to, with the same urgency the EP has devoted to protect citizens. But this will require also an acknowledging of the many forms of everyday internal gendered hostility that the formal governance cannot name. Notably, the European Parliament has the tools to do it, it demonstrated it in the Resolution of 1st June 2023, where both the self criticism and the commitment to change are present. Then, the tools and the language are enough, but what serve is not just the will to address the problem.

There are still several challenges. The growing presence of anti.gender actors within the EP, a phenomenon described by Berthet ²⁹⁰ and confirmed by the 2024 electoral results, creates an internal resistance to gender equality. This suggest that, in a place where nearly a third of Members is documented as opposing to gender equality as a supranational norm, probably the coalition needed to advance in this sense is so hard to achieve. A fact that was aslo reported by the Anonymous MEP 7, who concern about the anti-harassment mechanisms as having the possibility to be instrumentalised by political purposes.

In other words, the formal tools designed to protect women can also become a place where polarised discourses take place. Another challenge also concerns agency. Who should act to change? Closing the implementation gap will require mechanisms that need coordinated response, just across multiple institutional levels the progress can be measured.

²⁹⁰ Berthet, V., (2023). *Spotlight on the political groups as gender equality actors. 'Struggles over issues of gendered violence in the European Parliament'*. Policy Study.

This means that, the European Parliament has the capacity to become what it claims to be, and the women who answered, even belonging to the full range of the EP's political spectrum, first acknowledge that possibility.

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[Women in the European Parliament: signs of gender equality regression](#) | [ODI: Think change](#)

Appendices

APPENDIX A

Domande per l'intervista:

1. Come descriverebbe il clima istituzionale e professionale all'interno del PE?
2. Ha percepito differenze tra l'ambiente del PE e altri contesti politici in cui ha avuto modo di operare?
3. In che modo, secondo lei, il genere influisce sulle dinamiche quotidiane di lavoro all'interno dell'istituzione?
4. Ritiene che esistano differenze nel modo in cui uomini e donne vengono percepiti o trattati?
5. Le è mai capitato di assistere o sperimentare comportamenti ostili, intimidatori o svalutanti legati al genere all'interno del PE? Se sì: In quali forme si manifestano più frequentemente? Ad esempio, sotto forma di: linguaggio, esclusione, delegittimazione, attacchi online...
6. Secondo lei, esistono forme più sottili e meno visibili di ostilità che incidono sul lavoro quotidiano?
7. Quanto incide la dimensione online nella sua esperienza politica?
8. Ha mai notato differenze tra critiche politiche o attacchi che assumono una dimensione più personale o di genere?
9. Ritiene che tali dinamiche influenzino il modo in cui le donne partecipano o si espongono nel dibattito politico?
10. Ha mai modificato il suo modo di intervenire pubblicamente, comunicare o prendere posizione a causa di possibili reazioni ostili?
11. Secondo lei, queste dinamiche possono incidere sulle scelte di permanenza o sulla carriera politica?
12. Ritiene che il PE possieda di strumenti adeguati per affrontare questi fenomeni?
13. Secondo lei, esistono ostacoli alla segnalazione di tali episodi?
14. Che cosa dovrebbe cambiare, secondo lei, per rendere il PE uno spazio più sicuro e inclusivo?
15. C'è qualcosa che ritiene importante aggiungere e che non è stato affrontato?

APPENDIX B

TEMI E DOMANDE ORIENTATIVE PER L'INTERVISTA SCRITTA

Ricerca Accademica – Università degli Studi di Padova

Violence Against Women in Politics within the European Parliament: Mechanisms, Experiences and Institutional Responses.

Nota Introduttiva:

- Le seguenti domande rappresentano una traccia orientativa dei temi che verranno affrontati nell'ambito della ricerca. Le risposte potranno essere fornite liberamente, nella forma e lunghezza preferite.
- L'intervista si concentra esclusivamente su esperienze e osservazioni di carattere professionale.

DOMANDE:

1. Come descriverebbe il clima istituzionale e professionale all'interno del Parlamento Europeo, anche in relazione alle dinamiche di genere?
2. In che modo, secondo Lei, il genere può influenzare le dinamiche quotidiane di lavoro e le relazioni professionali all'interno dell'istituzione?
3. Nella Sua esperienza o osservazione, il genere incide sul modo in cui una persona viene percepita, ascoltata o legittimata nel contesto parlamentare?
4. Ritiene che esistano forme (anche indirette o meno visibili) di delegittimazione o ostilità legate al genere? In caso affermativo, come si manifestano?
5. Quanto incide la dimensione online nella vita politica delle eurodeputate? Ha mai osservato differenze tra critica politica e attacchi con connotazione personale o di genere?
6. A Suo avviso, tali dinamiche possono influenzare le modalità di partecipazione o di esposizione pubblica delle donne in politica?
7. Ritiene che il Parlamento Europeo disponga di strumenti adeguati per prevenire e gestire episodi di violenza o molestie di genere?
8. Quali miglioramenti ritiene necessari per rafforzare la tutela e promuovere un ambiente istituzionale più sicuro e inclusivo?

APPENDIX C

INFORMATIVA PER PARTECIPANTI

Titolo del progetto di ricerca

Violence Against Women in Politics within the European Parliament: Mechanisms, Experiences and Institutional Responses.

Ricercatrice

Cecilia Bigongiali

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in *Communication Strategies*

Università degli Studi di Padova

Cecilia.bigongiali@studenti.unipd.it

1. Scopo dello Studio

- La presente ricerca mira ad **analizzare come la violenza** contro le donne in politica **si manifesti all'interno del Parlamento Europeo** e attraverso quali meccanismi **influenzi** la partecipazione politica, la visibilità e la percezione della protezione istituzionale tra le deputate al Parlamento europeo (MEPs).
- Lo studio si concentra sulle eurodeputate italiane come gruppo nazionale inserito nel contesto sovranazionale del Parlamento europeo, al fine di esplorare come le dinamiche di genere si sviluppino all'interno di istituzioni che, formalmente, promuovono l'uguaglianza di genere.

2. Perché è Stata Invitata a Partecipare

- È stata invitata a partecipare in virtù del Suo ruolo di deputata al Parlamento europeo eletta in Italia. La Sua esperienza professionale e il Suo punto di vista sono fondamentali per comprendere in che modo le dinamiche istituzionali possano influenzare l'azione politica e la partecipazione delle donne.
- La partecipazione allo studio è completamente volontaria. È libera di rifiutare la partecipazione, di non rispondere a singole domande o di ritirarsi in qualsiasi momento, senza dover fornire alcuna motivazione. In caso di ritiro, i dati raccolti saranno eliminati ed esclusi dalla ricerca.

3. Cosa Comporta la Partecipazione

Se accetta di partecipare:

- Parteciperà a un'intervista semi-strutturata della durata di circa 45–60 minuti in Italiano.
- L'intervista potrà svolgersi in presenza oppure online, in base alle Sue preferenze.
- L'intervista verterà sulle Sue esperienze professionali all'interno del Parlamento europeo, sul clima istituzionale, sull'eventuale esposizione a dinamiche ostili o di natura genderizzata e sulla percezione dei meccanismi istituzionali di tutela.
- L'intervista sarà registrata in formato audio (senza registrazione video) esclusivamente ai fini della trascrizione e dell'analisi della ricerca. Le registrazioni saranno eliminate dopo la trascrizione.

4. Riservatezza e Protezione dei Dati

- Può scegliere di rimanere anonima.
- Eventuali dati identificativi potranno essere rimossi dalle trascrizioni su richiesta.
- Le registrazioni audio saranno conservate in modo sicuro e accessibili esclusivamente alla ricercatrice.
- Le registrazioni saranno eliminate dopo la trascrizione.
- I dati saranno utilizzati esclusivamente per finalità accademiche nell'ambito della tesi di laurea magistrale.
- Tutti i dati saranno trattati in conformità alla normativa vigente in materia di protezione dei dati personali (GDPR).

5. Rischi e benefici

- Lo studio affronta temi potenzialmente sensibili. Tuttavia, l'intervista si concentrerà **esclusivamente su esperienze professionali**.
- Non sono previsti benefici personali diretti. Tuttavia, il Suo contributo potrà favorire l'avanzamento della ricerca accademica in materia di uguaglianza di genere e qualità democratica nelle istituzioni europee.

Contatti

Per qualsiasi domanda, può contattare:

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APPENDIX D

MEPs	IN CARICA	FEMM	HA RISPOSTO
CHIARA GEMMA		SI	
CAROLINA MORACE		SI	
ALESSANDRA MORETTI		SI	SI
GIUSI PRINCI		SI	SI
BENEDETTA SCUDERI		SI	
SUSANNA CECCARDI		SI	
ANNAMARIA CISINT		SI	
ELENA DONAZZAN		SI	
CECILIA STRADA		SI	SI
ISABELLA ADINOLFI	NO	SI	
GIUSEPPINA PICIERNO	NO	SI	SI
ISABELLA TOVAGLIERI		2019/2024	
SILVIA COSTA	NO	SI	
MARA BIZZOTTO	NO	SI	
SIMONA RENATA BALDASSARRE	NO	SI	
LUCIA ANNUNZIATA			
CATERINA CHINNICI			
ANNALISA CORRADO			SI
CRISTINA GUARDA			SI
CAMILLA LAURETI			SI
LARA MAGONI			
LETIZIA MORATTI			
ILARIA SALIS			SI
SILVIA SARDONE			
ANTONELLA SBERNA			
IRENE TINAGLI			
GEORGIA TRAMACERE			SI
MARIA TERESA VIVALDINI			
VALENTINA PALMISANO			SI

APPENDIX E

EMAIL DI CONTATTO

Subject: RICHIESTA DI PARTECIPAZIONE A RICERCA ACCADEMICA - UNIVERSITA' DI PADOVA

Gentile Onorevole,

Mi chiamo Cecilia Bigongiali e sono una studentessa del corso magistrale *Communication Strategies* presso l'Università degli Studi di Padova.

La contatto per invitarLa a partecipare alla mia ricerca di Tesi Magistrale, intitolata

"Violence Against Women in Politics within the European Parliament: Mechanisms, Experiences and Institutional Responses".

Lo studio adotta un approccio di caso focalizzato sulle Eurodeputate italiane e si propone di analizzare come le dinamiche di violenza e ostilità di genere possano influenzare la partecipazione politica e la percezione della protezione istituzionale tra le deputate al Parlamento Europeo.

La Sua esperienza e il Suo punto di vista sarebbero estremamente preziosi per contribuire ad una migliore comprensione di queste tematiche.

La partecipazione consisterebbe in un'intervista semi-strutturata della durata di circa 45/60 minuti, da svolgersi in presenza oppure online, secondo le Sue preferenze. L'intervista tratterà esclusivamente esperienze professionali e sarà condotta nel pieno rispetto della riservatezza e della normativa sulla protezione dei dati personali.

In allegato trova il Foglio Informativo e il Modulo di Consenso (anche in inglese), con tutti i dettagli relativi allo studio.

La partecipazione è completamente volontaria e potrà ritirarsi in qualsiasi momento.

Resto a Sua completa disposizione per qualsiasi chiarimento e La ringrazio sin d'ora per l'attenzione.

Cordiali Saluti,

Cecilia Bigongiali

APPENDIX F

DOCUMENT CORPUS

TABLE 2:

DOCUMENT

YEAR NATURE PRODUCED BY MAIN FOCUS AIM

IPU/PACE- Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Europe	2018	Empirical Study	IPU + PACE	Prevalence of VAWIP, underreporting and reporting mechanisms in European Parliaments	External
Corbett Report	2019	Institutional reform resolution	European Parliament	Amendment of Rules of Procedure post MeTooEP, this is the first explicit prohibition of harassment	Internal
Rules of Procedure + Code of Appropriate Behaviour	2019	Normative framework	European Parliament	Formal prohibition of harassment, conduct standards and sanctions	Internal
4a. EPRS – Combating Gender-Based Violence: Cyber Violence	2021	Technical study	EPRS	Mapping cyberbiolence, national legislation fragmentation and policy options	External
4b. EP Resolution on Cyberviolence	2021	Legislative resolution	European Parliament	Formal recognition of cyberviolence as a threat to women's political participation	Internal
Resolution of 1 June 2023	2023	Institutional self-assessment resolution	European Parliament	Evaluation of post MeTooEP reforms, acknowledgement of persistent implementation gap	Internal
Rules of Procedure + Code of Appropriate Behaviour	2024	Normative framework	European Parliament	Updated conduct standards, sanctions and harassment governance framework	Internal
EPRS Briefing- Zamfir	2025	Empirical research briefing	EPRS	Overview of VAWIP across EU, state of Institutional responses	External