

Power has a Higher Price for Women: Threats and Violence Against Swedish Politicians

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“Harassment, threats and intimidation have become a normalised part of political life.”

Politicians all over the world increasingly face a situation in which harassment, threats and intimidation have become a normalised part of political life. This phenomenon is often studied under the umbrella term of political violence, which encompasses both physical and psychological violence.

Recently, policy actors and researchers have started raising a concern that political violence disproportionately affects women in politics. This report analyses three key aspects concerning violence against politicians:

1. To what extent and how often do men and women experience violence?
2. Do men and women experience different forms of violence?
3. Does political violence result in different consequences for men and women?

The study focuses on Swedish politicians. In order to answer the first question, I rely on extensive survey data on municipal politicians in three waves. Due to women's comparatively high level of representation across the Swedish political system, I am able to compare women and men who are similar in terms of party, incumbency status, hierarchical position and personal characteristics such as age and having immigrated to Sweden. I find that women rank-and-file politicians only experience marginally more violence than men. However, the higher up in the hierarchy, the greater the gender gap in terms of exposure to violence. Powerful and visible women experience far more violence than any other politicians.

The second question is analysed using survey and interview data involving Swedish MPs with regard to online abuse. I find that women and men experience similar levels of offensive comments and direct threats on social media, while women experience a significantly greater volume of abusive comments related to gender and sexuality. Whereas men primarily experience online abuse targeting their roles and opinions as

politicians, women experience online abuse that sexualises them and targets their gender instead of their political role.

The last question is studied using the same survey and interview data on Swedish MPs. I find that there is a correlation between exposure to online abuse and considering leaving politics when it comes to men but not when it comes to women. Another gendered consequence is that women experience more limitations in terms of their use of social media as a result of online abuse. In particular, they more often than men refrain from discussing certain topics such as migration and gender equality.

These findings have implications for the functioning of representative democracy, as the issues politicians refrain from debating publicly, on account of harassment, risk becoming obscured. Hence, these questions may suffer from weaker policy development and a reduced demand for action by the general public. The withdrawal of women from public debates also has implications for women's policy influence at large, as advocacy and shaping public opinion play a key role in policymaking.

Furthermore, the results also indicate that election results alone do not determine the level of influence awarded to politicians. Gender differences in violence against politicians lead to a situation in which the sex of a politician determines their room for manoeuvre. The greater volume and cruder nature of the attacks on women entail that they are faced with other considerations than men when making decisions concerning their political offices. Violence casts another light on the choice regarding which issues to advocate, when and how to engage in debates and whether they are ready to take on leadership assignments. In other words, women and men do not enjoy equal opportunities when it comes to political offices in Sweden, in stark contrast to the principles of democratic equality.

Furthermore, the fact that these gender differences in exposure to violence are the most pronounced among the most powerful and visible politicians potentially has far-reaching symbolic implications. Politics has for a long time been an exclusive sphere for men, and male political dominance remains strong in many countries. Women taking on leadership positions and being visible in politics is paramount for the political

participation and inclusion of female citizens. Female citizens are likely affected negatively by witnessing the high price paid by powerful and visible female politicians.

The results indicate that security work and support to politicians could play a key role for political equality, and important stakeholders in this respect include political parties and parliamentary organisations.

