

SUBMISSION



Men's Development Network
Policy Submission for task
force on safe participation in
political life



**White Ribbon
Ireland**

Men Ending Gender-Based Violence



**Men's
Development
Network**

Introduction

As a national organisation which advocates for transforming masculinities, a feminist and intersectional approach to advance the changing of norms and behaviours and to promote equality,¹ Men's Development Network (MDN) welcome the invitation to provide a written submission to the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life. Men's Development Network has been active for 26 years in engaging men and boys to promote positive forms of masculinity and to encourage them to be their most authentic selves while promoting social, emotional and inter-personal development and fostering the engagement of men and boys as allies for gender equality and the ending of Gender Based Violence. Working towards these goals MDN presently runs a number of focussed programmes, these include:

- (1) The CHOICES Programme the national domestic violence intervention programme working with male perpetrators to end their violent or abusive behaviour and become non-violent and respectful within their intimate partner relationships.
- (2) The Male Advice Line – the national freephone advice and support service for male victims/survivors of domestic abuse.
- (3) The White Ribbon Campaign – MDN is the national delivery agent of the White Ribbon Campaign which aims to engage with men and boys on ending Violence Against Women and Gender Based Violence.

This policy submission aims to support the Task Force on Safe Participation in Public Life in consideration of policy, practices, and norms in this area. It will begin by considering the role and place of women in public life before proceeding to outline some of the challenges they frequently face in terms of Violence Against Women in Public (VAWIP). It will then outline some of the work of MDN in this area before concluding with some proposals.

Women in Public Life

Ireland has come a long way in recent decades in the area of gender equality, albeit from what was a very low bar. In terms of gender inequalities in public life there are still massive disparities in participation according to gender. The European Institute for Gender Equality gives an annual report² which scores EU member states to see how far they are from reaching gender equality. The index uses a scale of 1 to 100 where 1 denotes total inequality and 100 denotes full equality. The scores are compiled based on metrics in 6 core domains namely:

- Work
- Money

¹ For further information, see: <<https://mensnetwork.ie/>> accessed February 24th, 2022.

² <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/country/IE>

- Knowledge
- Time
- Power
- Health

The most recent report from 2021 showed that Ireland ranks highly overall in gender equality with a creditable score of 73.1 which places it 7th overall and 5.1 points above the EU average of 68. Despite this relatively high position overall the area where Ireland scores particularly low is that of equality of access to power and political decision making with women at the time accounting for a mere 26% of ministers, 27% of members of parliament and 25% share of regional assemblies.

In terms of accessibility of politics for women one of the biggest issues is that of selection processes. McGing and White³ note how the selection process for picking electoral candidates ‘favours well networked individuals, usually with local political experience and a history of party activism’ (2012, p. 10) while also noting how, due to the ‘persistent sexual division of care in Irish society women are less likely to possess these types of capital to the same extent as men’ (2012, p. 5). A report by the National Council of Women in Ireland⁴ (2019) noted how access to childcare was a significant barrier for the participation of women in electoral politics while noting that such barriers were not as significant for male candidates.

As well as issues around selection processes acting as a disadvantage to women there is also the fact that the day-to-day operation of politics is run on a markedly masculine model with male norms, values and lifestyles informing how politics works. Shedova⁵ notes how ‘politics is often based on the idea of ‘winners and losers’ competition and confrontation, rather than on systematic collaboration and consensus, especially across party lines’ (Shvedova 2005, pp 34-35). In this sense people are expected to enter politics under male terms of reference, as competitors who are tough and resilient and ready to fight and compete rather than collaborate.

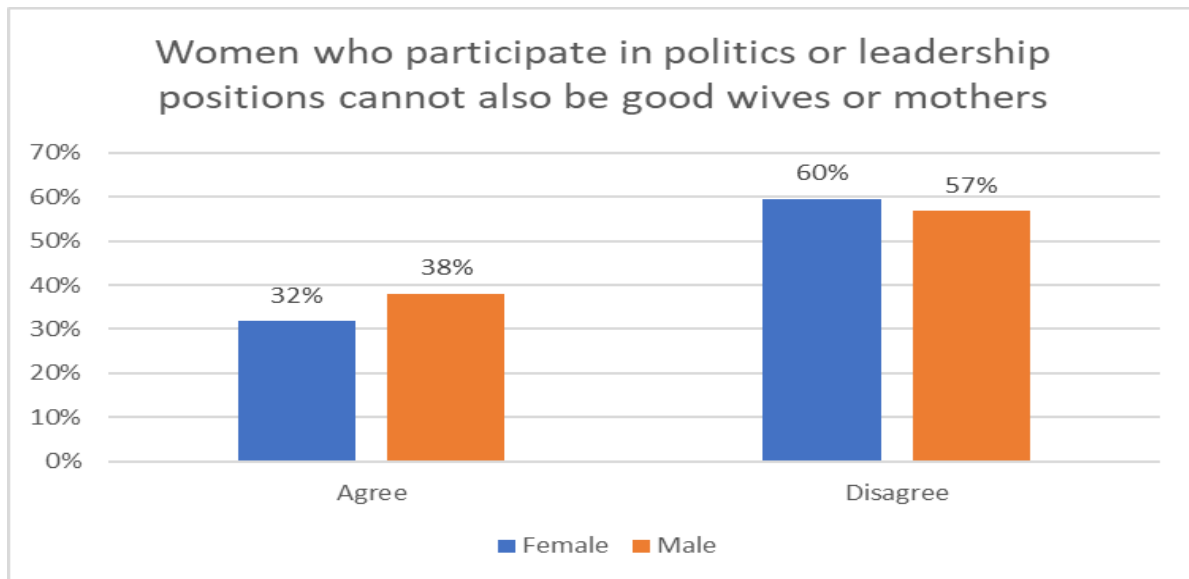
Gender roles and norms are also important with regard to how women in public life are viewed. Research carried out by Men’s Development Network⁶ in 2023 found that 32% of women and 38% of men agreed to some extent with the statement ‘Women who participate in politics or leadership positions cannot also be good wives or mothers’. This shows how many people view public life or leadership roles for women as being in competition with other roles expected of them.

³ <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3134>

⁴ https://www.nwci.ie/learn/publication/women_beyond_the_dail_more_women_in_local_government

⁵ <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/women-parliament-beyond-numbers-revised-edition>

⁶ <chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/https://mensnetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/SOWFfinalreport-1.pdf>



Due to its small size and highly interlinked population Irish politics is typified by a culture of clientelism, localism, and availability of politicians in their local constituency. Research conducted by Professor Niamh Hourigan in 2015⁷ described the importance for TDs in attending to local constituency issues as a measure of getting re-elected. Public figures by nature of the role they are performing are required to be available and contactable to almost everyone via numerous channels. Social Media has thus become an essential tool for public figures as it allows for them to be available and to communicate with their constituents and build a profile with the broader public in general. It is also however a place where targeted hostility, abuse, threats, and stalking occur.

Violence Against Women in Public

The United Nations Guidance⁸ note defines violence against women in politics as ‘any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman’. Abuse can be employed as a means of attempting to exclude particular types of people from public life. Women or members of a minority ethnic group or LGBTQ+ community are frequently targeted because of their identity. There is also however a further chilling effect when members of a particular group are subject to abuse it can prevent other members of that group from putting themselves forward for participation in public life. Violence/ abuse of public figures can thus be about attempting to determine who public life belongs to, it is a means of policing entry and excluding those who are not deemed to belong.

⁷ Hourigan, Rule- Breakers Why Being There Trumps Being Fair 2015

⁸ chrome-

extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglefindmkaj/https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Guidance-note-Preventing-violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf

Such abuse and vitriol can similarly be marshalled as a means of attempting to set agendas in public discussion. Research into the experiences of female journalists online⁹ (Wheatley 2023) notes how certain topics such as immigration or the traveller community are likely to provoke fierce reactions. Similarly, topics which relate to the so called ‘culture wars’ such as race, gender identity or sexuality are likely to provoke ire. If particular topics in public discussions draw prolonged abuse, then it becomes more likely that people will pull back from discussing them in public or will moderate their speech as a way of pre-emptively reacting to abuse or criticism. This means that these topics can be removed from the agenda as people understandably self-police so as to avoid campaigns of harassment or abuse.

There is a need to differentiate between legitimate criticism of public figures and abuse. While it is hard to definitively draw up a typology of what constitutes abuse it is something that is evident when you see it. Abuse refers to criticisms which are based on personal or physical characteristics of the person themselves, their gender, or their membership of a minority ethnic or religious group. Legitimate criticism is based on the actions or words of the person which relate to their fulfilling of their public role. Legitimate criticism can be robust and even unpleasant to the person subjected to it, but this is not to say that it is always abuse. Similarly, it is important for people in politics to be aware of the influence their decisions, words and actions have on other people and to be aware of their capacity as people in public to do tangible harm to others. At the same time however it is important to name abuse of public figures for what it is, violence which is aimed at excluding people from public/political life or of agenda setting by attempting to take particular topics off the agenda by making them toxic in public discussion.

While male politicians undoubtedly receive abusive comments relating to their words or actions the gendered dimension of how women experience this relates to how they are constantly subject to comments on their appearance. These range from innocuous ‘compliments’ to insults and threats of violence. While the more innocuous side of this may be relatively harmless it acts as a means of judging women based on sexist criteria of how they look or dress rather than their words or actions. The particular types of abuse faced by women in public life happen alongside and at the same time as these other types of abuse that happen to men. This is also the case for public figures who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups or any other minority community. In Ireland there has been high profile cases and even criminal convictions for online targeted harassment and abuse of politicians, yet these public cases represent a small amount in comparison to the wider prevalence of harassment of women online. It is crucial that there is a means by which such underlying and pervasive practices are systematically captured so it becomes possible to measure their prevalence.

[The White Ribbon Campaign](#)

The White Ribbon Campaign aims to educate men and boys and raise awareness about the corrosive effects of Gender Based Violence for the purpose of making positive change. It aims to build a

⁹ <https://www.dcu.ie/commsteam/policy/social-media-and-online-hostility-experiences-women-irish-journalism>

community of change makers who reject Gender Based Violence and display positive masculine traits to foster and promote a culture of equality and respect. It is a male-led movement which aims to end all forms of Gender Based Violence including violence against women and girls by addressing some of its root causes, namely harmful masculine norms of misogyny. It aims to do this by engaging men and boys on a preventative basis by changing attitudes and behaviours that allow GBV to occur. As part of the White Ribbon Campaign men are asked to take a pledge to never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women or Gender Based Violence. The Irish White Ribbon Campaign has also included the development and running of a pilot scheme to train secondary school teachers on preventing Gender Based Violence. The pilot involved developing an online training resource and an in person two-day training programme.

Proposals

There are a number of reasons why VAWIP continues, firstly it has been to some extent normalised and seen as part and parcel of public life with the insinuation being that those who cannot handle it are not cut out for the role or need to toughen up. Similarly, when VAWIP is normalised and seen as part of the process it can be minimised by the people subjected to it and seen as not really being that much of a problem. There is a pressing need to end the idea that enduring this is simply the cost of being a public figure. *It is simply unacceptable that anyone in the course of doing their work should be subjected to threats, abuse, or slander*, this applies as much to librarians or shop keepers as it does to public figures and politicians. It should not be that people become desensitised to abuse, or accept it as normal, or as being part and parcel of engagement in public life.

There are also gaps and weaknesses in how this problem is addressed as there are not sufficient reporting mechanisms. Research by the National Women's Council of Ireland¹⁰ (McGing & Lima 2022) notes that while there are a range of policies in place within political parties for reporting fellow members of the party for abuse there are no formal procedures or guidelines for when abuse comes from a member of the public. The report also notes how there are no procedures in any of the parties for recording instances of online abuse against members. This means that there is a lack of reliable and systematic data on which to assess the scale of the problem. There is a need for spaces to be created for mechanisms of disclosure so that these kinds of abuse and violence can be quantified and brought out into the public domain.

It is important to document and to determine the extent to which abuse is happening, to whom it is happening, when and in reaction to what comments/events. This would make it possible to understand who is committing these acts of abuse and in broad strokes to determine if there are attempts to repress or further any particular topics or political agenda. At present it is individual women who come forward to discuss these events, and while admirable journalistic work has been carried out to bring these

¹⁰ https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Toolkit_SocialMediaAbuse_2022FINAL.pdf

practices to light a more systematic approach would be beneficial as it would demonstrate the scale of the problem and point towards potential solutions in addressing it. To this end it would be beneficial for people in public life to have a repository for the reporting of instances of abuse. In a similar vein, there are urgent requirements for systematic research into the broader area of abuse and harassment in public life. If possible, funding should be made available to research this topic.

Impunity is a strong factor in the perpetuation of violence against women in public life. There is a need for social media companies to be brought to task in promptly removing defamatory or abusive content from their platforms. At present it takes too long and is the threshold of what constitutes such material is far too high. It takes little time and effort to send someone an abusive message, and the vast majority of times there are little if any consequences for those who do. This combination means that abuse is common as it is easy to perpetrate with impunity. The biggest sanction available to social media sites is that of cancelling the account of someone who repeatedly carries out abusive actions. Yet not enough has been done to prevent such people from simply setting up a new account and starting over. There is a responsibility on social media platforms in particular to do more to protect their users against abuse and to be quicker and more effective in excluding proven abusers from their platforms.

The Oireachtas is an employer and as such has responsibilities to make the place of employment safe, and to react appropriately to support members when instances of abuse are reported/declared. There should be protocols enacted to support those who have been targeted but also to prevent abuse. A group such as this task force should be permanently established which can advise on good practice for online safety, security and preventing abuse. In January 2023 Ireland became the 24th country to ratify International Labour Organisation Convention 190 which aims to eliminate violence and harassment in the world of work, this convention will enter into force in Ireland on 12th January 2024 which means that we are legally as well as duty bound to ensure workplaces free of violence and harassment. This goes as much for librarians and shop keepers as it does to public representatives.