

Discredited and Disgraced: Gender-Based Violence against Women Politicians and Journalists in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the gender-based violence experienced by women politicians and journalists in Slovakia following the 2023 parliamentary elections, a period marked by democratic backsliding. Drawing on 14 semi-structured interviews with women politicians, journalists, and gender-equality experts, it analyses the forms and impacts of the violence, focusing on meaning-making processes, coping strategies, and motivations to remain publicly active. The findings show that women are frequently targeted through gendered attacks aimed not only at their personal lives and families but also at the values they represent, including democracy, human rights, and gender equality. These attacks often involve semiotic violence designed to discredit and disgrace them, such as accusations of being “foreign agents,” “prostitutes,” or “sell-outs.” The study identifies this violence as a context-specific mechanism linking gender-based violence with broader political attacks against ideological opposition. It demonstrates how such violence operates as a strategic tool to silence women and limit their participation, particularly in the absence of effective institutional protection, thereby undermining democratic governance and diversity.

KEYWORDS

gender-based violence, political violence, democratic backsliding, semiotic violence

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, women politicians receive death threats, experience smear campaigns such as the ones targeting Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (MCCLURE, 2023) or, in extreme cases, are killed, as in the case of British politician Jo Cox in 2016 (COBAIN & TAYLOR, 2016). Recent years have seen several politically or socially active women leave the public sphere in Slovakia – President Zuzana Čaputová (BALOGOVÁ, 2023) and the politician Ďuriš-Nicholsonová left politics, a journalist resigned as editor in chief of a major newspaper (SME.SK, 2025), and several other journalists and reporters took extended breaks or stopped their careers. These events must be understood in the context of the violence and abuse targeting women in the public sphere as well as the increasing pressures from politicians and private groups aiming to influence the work of independent media and civil society (BÁRDY, 2024; MIKUŠOVIČ & BENEDIKOVIČOVÁ, 2024).

The phenomenon of gender-based violence against women in politics, recently expanded to include journalists, and human rights and gender-equality activists, has been conceptualised, theorised and researched by both scholars and practitioners. The focus of this work has been on understanding its forms, motivations, and consequences; researching its prevalence and developing practical tools to prevent or combat it. Violence against women in politics and the media has serious individual and societal consequences. The targeted women often experience psychosomatic harms, including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder; and may respond with self-censorship or a withdrawal from public engagement (FEINSTEIN ET AL., 2025). Such violence can limit professional opportunities, cause economic harm and contribute to women's exits from political and journalistic careers (BECK ET AL., 2022; POSETTI & SHABBIR, 2022; OSCE OFFICE FOR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS, 2022). On the societal level, violence against women in public roles undermines participation, representation, and diversity by delegitimising women's competence and authority. It weakens democratic governance both by pushing women out of public life and by discouraging others from entering it, thereby posing a structural threat to democratic pluralism (BARDALL & MYERS, 2018; WOOD, 2024).

This journal article builds on the existing body of research on gendered aspects of democratic backsliding (KRIZSAN & ROGGEBAUD, 2018, 2019;

GRZEBALSKA & PETŮ, 2018), which focuses mostly on reversals of gender-equality policies or effects of backsliding on human rights actors or women's movements. Such research has focused on the Central and Eastern European region, especially Hungary, Poland, and Croatia. This article broadens the research focus to analyse the gender-based violence experienced by women politicians and journalists in the specific context of the Slovak Republic in the period following the 2023 parliamentary elections, which can be characterised by processes of democratic backsliding in combination with an anti-gender movement. Whereas the processes of gendered democratic backsliding in Slovakia have been studied, sufficient attention has not been paid to the intersections of gender-based violence and women's public participation in this context. This article explores the forms and impacts of the acts of violence that women sustained but goes beyond individual experiences and seeks to identify key meaning-making processes and narratives related to their coping mechanisms and motivation to stay active in public life. It analyses women's experiences based on 14 semi-structured interviews with women politicians, journalists and gender equality experts. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it enriches the understanding of violence against women in politics by contextualising it within the democratic backsliding and anti-gender activism in Slovakia, while focusing specifically on women who advocate for democracy, human rights, and gender equality or who express criticism of the government. Second, it further deepens the understanding of the impacts of gender-based violence on women's participation in public life and democracy as such.

The findings demonstrate that women are commonly attacked in gendered ways, with the attacks targeting their appearance, personal or sexual lives, or families, but most significantly the values they represent. Acts of semiotic violence involving referring to them as "foreign agents", "prostitutes," "sell-outs" or "Soros's girls" and accusing them of betraying national interests and being enemies of the country, are used to render them discredited and disgraced. The author proposes that this rendering is a specific mode of semiotic violence to account for such abuse. This underscores the connections between violence against women in politics and wider patterns of political violence targeting political or ideological opposition. Further analysis reveals that gender-based violence against women in the public sphere in Slovakia is used as a strategic tool to abuse,

silence, and ultimately push women out of the public space and from specific areas of expertise. This is achieved by various attacks, but often those targeting women's families and their motherhood status. In cases of such attacks, the wellbeing and safety of families and children is deemed the deciding factor for the women's willingness and motivation to stay publicly engaged. Coupled with a lack of available reporting, protection, and support mechanisms, this leads to an internalisation and individualisation of the responsibility to cope with violence and the continued significance of the public/private divide when it comes to women's participation in public life.

STUDYING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS: CONCEPTUALISATION, TERMS AND APPROACHES

The phenomenon of violence against women in politics has gained attention and recognition globally in the last decades, both in the media and from researchers, and has been recognised to affect women all over the globe – from Latin and South America (PISCOPO, 2016B; SANÍN, 2020, 2022) to Europe (IPU & PACE, 2018), the Asia-Pacific (IPU ET AL., 2025; NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE, 2020), Africa (IYER, 2021), and North America (RANEY, 2023; WAGNER, 2022). This violence affects not only female politicians, but also other women with public-facing roles, such as journalists, reporters, human rights defenders, or activists and feminists.

Considerable research measuring violence against women in politics has been undertaken with the goal of advocating for and implementing targeted measures to address and combat violence against women in politics. Most notably, IPU, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, carried out the first global research on sexism, harassment, and violence against women parliamentarians (2016). Several guides have also been published: IPU published *Guidelines For the Elimination of Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliament* (IPU, 2019) and the National Democratic Institute together with the International Women's Media Foundation published *Empower & Lead: A Guide For Women in Politics and the Media On Using the Media Safely and Effectively* (2023). UN Women also published a *Guidance note on Preventing violence against women in politics* (2021) and a *Benchmark for Political Parties on Preventing Violence against Women in Politics* published by the Political Party Peer Network et al. (2022).

The main approaches to conceptualising and studying this type of violence are the political violence approach, the concept of electoral violence, and the violence against women in politics approach. The political violence approach examines both women's and men's experiences with acts of political violence, framing them as attempts to drive individuals from politics, sometimes in the context of a failing rule of law, authoritarianism or general violence in connection with insecurity (PISCOPO, 2016B). Women may be targeted for their party affiliation, political views, or roles as public officials. The relevant research often compares men's and women's experiences (BJARNEGÅRD ET AL., 2022; HÅKANSSON, 2024A, 2024B), while the related policy responses focus on security measures and legal prosecution for the offences. Electoral violence as a concept focuses on violence experienced by candidates, but also by voters and other political party or campaign staff, and government officials. Electoral violence is understood as a tool to influence election outcomes – who gains or keeps power (BARDALL, 2011; BIRCH ET AL., 2020; BJARNEGÅRD, 2018; WOOD, 2024). This research strand often centres on countries in periods of political transition or unrest, or new democracies (BARDALL ET AL., 2018; HÖGLUND 2009; STALLONE & ZULVER, 2025). The third approach sees violence against women in politics as a form of gender-based violence rooted in inequality, patriarchy, and discrimination (KROOK, 2015; KROOK & SANÍN, 2016A). This violence aims to exclude women – and other marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, individuals with a diverse gender identity or sexual orientation – from political life. The attacks are understood as attempts to intimidate and delegitimise women and other individuals from non-hegemonic groups, and exclude them from participation and decision-making, thus reinforcing existing power structures. Research in this field focuses on barriers women face, the forms of violence they experience, and its impact on participation, with the related policy responses emphasising gender-sensitive tools, support, and prevention (KROOK, 2010; KROOK & TRUE, 2012; PISCOPO, 2016A).

Different forms of violence can be broadly organised into four distinct forms: physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence. This organisation follows a categorisation proposed by Krook & Sanín (2016A) and is supplemented with the category of cyber-violence. Physical violence can include acts ranging from slaps, beatings, infliction of bodily harm, and throwing objects to extreme acts of violence like torture, kidnappings or killings. Sexual violence includes acts of sexual harassment, forced

sexual acts, rape and attempted rape. Economic violence includes being denied access to the resources necessary for the successful execution of one's mandate, such as funds, and access to an office, equipment or services (*IBID.*). Psychological violence includes all targeted acts that negatively affect the wellbeing, safety, and mental health of the targeted individuals. These can include threats, blackmail, and the spread of any abusive, violent, sexualised, humiliating or intimidating comments, texts, images or videos which are meant to harass, ridicule, shame, and/or discriminate against the victim (*BARDALL, 2013*). Women are particularly vulnerable to psychological violence, especially to claims related to morality and sexuality (*IBID.*). Acts of psychological violence are meant to inflict damage on the targeted women, possibly leading to their isolation or complete withdrawal (*KROOK & SANÍN, 2016A*).

Symbolic (*IBID.*) and semiotic violence (*KROOK, 2022*) are distinct types of psychological violence and highlight how discourse, representation, and signs are used to erase or delegitimise women. Symbolic violence makes women invisible or portrays them as incompetent, while semiotic violence more directly employs language, images or symbols to discipline and exclude women. Symbolic violence reproduces gendered and unequal hierarchies through discourses and practices that are common in society and may be culture-specific, oftentimes without the use of direct attacks or force.

The concept of semiotic violence is used to analyse and understand acts of violence perpetrated by language, images or body language. Semiotic violence draws on public signification, gendered norms and inequalities; and uses signs and symbols to discipline women and ultimately keep them from exercising their rights to political participation. Because it draws on socially and culturally significant signs and tropes, its acts are understood by society as being aimed at all women, not just the ones targeted (*IBID.*). Where symbolic violence draws on structural inequality by questioning women's suitability for politics, semiotic violence uses intentional discursive practices in the form of signs, language or images to attack and harm women in politics on both individual and collective levels. The different forms of gender-based violence against women in politics often occur simultaneously or as a continuum of violent acts, which makes it difficult to clearly distinguish between them.

Many of the previously discussed forms and examples of violence can be perpetrated online. According to the European Women's Lobby (2017), women are 27 times more likely to experience harassment online compared to men. Similarly, an Inter-Parliamentary Union survey revealed that 85% of women parliamentarians had experienced psychological violence and 58% had faced online sexual harassment and sexist attacks (IPU & PACE, 2018). Common forms of cyberviolence include doxxing – publishing of personal information, cyber-harassment, cyber-stalking, or sharing of claims, images or videos, whether real or fabricated with the use of artificial intelligence, without consent (BAKER ET AL., N.D.; BARDALL, 2013). There are several key aspects which characterise cyberviolence and make it especially damaging for women in public roles: the scope and speed of content sharing, the lack of accountability for perpetrators, difficulties with investigating and prosecuting such crimes, and the severity of the consequences (IBID., BARDALL, 2023). The speed, scope, and public character of cyberviolence make it difficult to identify the original source and perpetrator of the attack, a problem which is compounded by the option to stay anonymous on most platforms. Personal data protection and the difficulty with enforcing community standards and codes of conduct, often grant perpetrators a sense of impunity. Common consequences of cyberviolence include self-censorship, loss of political support, psychological harms, and withdrawal from social media or public life altogether (BECK ET AL., 2022; KOCH ET AL., 2025). Furthermore, cyber violence has a chilling effect – deterring women who witness it from entering politics (BARDALL, 2013).

Following the feminist tradition, this article recognises that violence against women in politics is a form of gender-based violence and takes a broad understanding of its forms. It conceptualises violence as multidimensional and intersectional, and as affecting different women in different ways depending on their different vulnerabilities and characteristics, such as their age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or gender-identity. It further recognises that violence against women in politics can be culture-specific (DHRODIA, 2018; KROOK & SANÍN, 2016B; KUPERBERG, 2018) and that women from marginalised groups experience more severe violence and report graver impacts of it on their mental health – this is especially the case for queer politicians (STEPHENSON ET AL., 2025) and politicians from an ethnic minority (WATSON ET AL., 2025).

This research draws on the conceptualisation of violence against women in politics regarding its forms (physical, psychological, sexual and economic) as proposed by Krook and Sanín (^{2016A}) with a specific focus on symbolic (^{IBID.}) and semiotic violence (^{KROOK, 2022}). It further builds on the concept of the public/private division of spheres. The division of public and private spheres has historically associated men with matters related to the public sphere, including politics, and women with the private sphere. Feminist critique has maintained that these two spheres are actually interconnected, as matters considered private are in fact regulated by the state and are thus political (^{PATEMAN, 1987; VERLOO & LOMBARDO, 2007}). By entering the political and media spheres, women are symbolically transgressing this divide.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The following section outlines the research methodology, including the sampling method, the selected analytical framework for the analysis of experiences of gender-based violence against women in public roles in Slovakia, namely the framework of gendered motives, forms and impacts (^{BARDALL ET AL., 2020}), and a short contextualisation of the current socio-political climate in Slovakia. The analysis focuses on women's personal experiences of violence, while understanding the meaning-making processes and strategies they employ to come to terms and deal with violence. The findings of the analysis inform the conclusions about the consequences of violence on women's participation and presence in public life, and help identify emerging patterns of gender-based violence against publicly active women.

The aim of this research is not to quantify gender-based violence against women in politics and journalism and gender-equality experts, or to compare women's and men's experiences, but to account for the current social and political environment marked by aspects of democratic backsliding (^{BERMEO, 2016}). The purposive sampling strategy was aimed at women politicians from oppositional political parties and journalists from established independent media, who were commonly targeted in the attacks. It was based on convenience and snowballing, with 24 politicians, journalists and gender equality experts contacted by email with information about the research goals and a request to participate. 14 in-person or

virtual interviews were conducted between April and May 2024. Among the 14 interviewees, there were eight members of parliament, one candidate running for the 2024 European Parliament elections, three journalists and two gender equality experts. The interviews with the politicians cover the respective periods since the start of each politician's active participation, either in politics or civil society, the interviews with the journalists focus largely on the period since the 2018 murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak, and the gender-equality expert interviews focus on the period after the 2014 protests against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The primary data from the qualitative interviews is supplemented with relevant, publicly available sources about politicians' experiences of gender-based violence. These are mostly related to President Zuzana Čaputová because her experiences took place before and during the time of the conducting of the interviews as well as because of the highly publicised nature and impacts of the events related to her.

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic and the public character of the respondents' careers, ethical considerations were implemented. All the respondents formally expressed consent and received information about the research, data storage and confidentiality.¹ The research design respected feminist research principles – sensitivity and an awareness of power dynamics and the character of elite interviews, which affect and shifts the power asymmetry. At the same time, all the respondents were able to actively intervene in the interview process by posing questions, refusing to answer or discuss any of the questions, and pausing or stopping the interview. All the interviews were carried out in a trauma-informed manner and with respect for the do-no-harm principle.

The collected data was analysed using the framework of gendered motives, forms and impacts (BARDALL ET AL., 2020). The analysis of the presence or absence of gender on three levels of analysis – in the motives, forms, and impacts of individual acts of violence – enables a rich and nuanced understanding of violence against women in politics. Such an understanding is not reductionist and recognises that experiences can have different – combined or mutually exclusive – gendered forms and impacts irrespective of the motivations behind them. The forms and impacts of acts of violence are shaped by the social and cultural context and related beliefs about gender norms and women's roles in relation to public participation (IBID.).

This is closely related to the concept of “gendered scripts,” which are culture specific and often rely on messages related to women’s social roles, sexuality, bodies or morality, which are used to deny their participation in and suitedness for public roles (KROOK & SANÍN, 2016B).

Much of the conceptual and theoretical work on violence against women in politics has been concerned with differentiating between acts of violence against women motivated by their gender and those that are not motivated by it – whether they are acts with the aim to ultimately push women out of politics or simply acts of political violence against somebody who happens to be a woman (BJARNEGÅRD, 2018; KROOK, 2023; PISCOPO, 2016B). This research, on the other hand, draws attention to the lived experiences of women and their understanding of the violence they experience with its gendered motivations. In the context of the anti-gender movement and democratic backsliding, the motivations become blurred and intersect, and the research focus is on the forms and impacts of acts of violence. The differentiation between individual acts and their forms and impacts allows for the identification and understanding of wider patterns of violence against women in public roles in the context of the increasing democratic backsliding and gender-equality backlash in current Slovakia.

The qualitative data from the 14 interviews has been transcribed and coded for the subsequent analysis. First, individual acts of violence or their patterns were coded using the motives, forms and impacts framework with the aim of identifying common themes across the interviews. Afterwards, narratives and themes related to how women themselves recount their experiences with violence, and how they make sense of them and cope with them, were identified.

THE CURRENT SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

This research is set against the backdrop of the current social and political context in Slovakia, which is characterised by increasing democratic backsliding (ČUROŠ, 2024; NORD ET AL., 2025) with gendered aspects. According to Krizsan and Roggeband (2018), political and social attacks on gender-equality policies and women’s increased participation can be understood as gendered aspects of democratic backsliding and wider

trends of conservatism. In Slovakia, these have been on the rise since 2014, as exemplified by the protests against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, over 30 legislative proposals aimed at restricting the right to abortion in the last six years (MOŽNOSŤ VOĽBY, 2025), and the changes at the Gender Equality Department under the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Family. These changes were related to its personnel as well as the replacement of the phrase “gender equality” with “equality between women and men” and “equality of opportunities” in strategies and documents (MAĎAROVÁ & HARDOŠ, 2022; MAĎAROVÁ & VALKOVIČOVÁ, 2021; VARGOVČÍKOVÁ, 2021).

Politically, the period since the 2018 murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée has been very unstable and marked by increasing polarisation. In the period between 2018 and 2025, Slovakia had six different governments, starting with the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico in 2018 after nation-wide protests only for SMER to win the September 2023 elections with Fico becoming Prime Minister for the fourth time. The current government, the fourth to be led by SMER-SD with Fico as Prime Minister, passed several laws negatively impacting the rule of law, democracy, civil society, and media freedom. An expansive amendment of the criminal code was adopted, and it reduced penalties and reclassified crimes, including financial crimes and corruption, and also dissolved the Special Prosecution Office (JOCHECOVÁ, 2024). The government has been critical of independent media, which manifested in the adoption of several laws and organisational changes – the public broadcaster RTVS has been dissolved and replaced with a new legal entity with a new leadership and structure, and there have also been attempts to restrict the freedom of access to information (NICHOLSON, 2024). Furthermore, governmental MPs and politicians have been boycotting the most important independent media, including the most-watched television channel, by refusing to answer their questions during press conferences, attend political debates involving them or give them interviews (IBID). Accusations against and attacks on media by governmental politicians have intensified after the attempted assassination of Fico in May 2024, for which he and others directly blamed the media and the opposition by accusing them of incitement to violence (ECPMF, 2024).

PROSTITUTES, AGENTS AND ENEMIES: SEMIOTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SLOVAKIA

Despite this article focusing primarily on semiotic violence, the respondents recounted their experiences with a wide range of violent acts and attacks, including a years-long experience with a stalker along the online-offline continuum, receiving a condom filled with semen in an envelope, being physically and verbally attacked in public, receiving death threats, and receiving unsolicited videos of naked or masturbating men. The period when the interviews were conducted was marked by a number of high-profile events related to gender-based violence against the then President Zuzana Čaputová, which sparked a wider debate about violence against women in politics, with several politicians sharing their related experiences in the media (MIKUŠOVIČ, 2024; TÓDOVÁ, 2024). An envelope with four bullets was sent to the president with the implication that they were for her, her partner and her two children; and a person also entered her private property at night despite security being present (KATUŠKA, 2023; SABO, 2024). During her entire term, Čaputová represented democratic and pro-European values and demonstrated her support for Ukraine. She vetoed several laws both before and after the 2023 elections, which put her in opposition with both governments, but especially with the government led by SMER-SD that entered office in 2023. Čaputová's presidential mandate was characterised by a constant stream of harassment, threats, and attacks perpetrated against her by various SMER-SD party members, including the Prime Minister, other MPs, public officials and their allies. These attacks were then further echoed and amplified by members of the public on social media in response to the politicians' outspoken incitement (BURKE, 2023). The attacks against Čaputová represent a clear example of a semiotic violence combining several context-dependent tropes – accusing Čaputová of being a prostitute, a foreign agent, and/or a sell-out to foreign political powers, especially the United States and, to a lesser extent, the European Union, which is often referred to as “Brussels” (HARZER, 2024). This trope is exemplified by an event which took place during a SMER party rally held during the 2022 Labour Day celebrations. On this occasion, Vice-Chairman Ľuboš Blaha asked the audience “Čaputová is a what? An American...?”, and the crowd repeatedly yelled back “An American whore” (KYSEL', 2022).

The strategy of accusing women of being prostitutes, agents, or sell-outs to other governments, individuals or interest groups has been repeatedly echoed by the interview respondents. The commonly mentioned figures who allegedly “sponsor,” buy, or give instructions to the women include the US financier George Soros, who is often targeted by Viktor Orban, and thus this form of violence is linked with the wider context of democratic backsliding, anti-gender movements and their strategies and narratives in other countries. Other examples of such semiotic violence include mentions of the targeted persons being affiliated with the US Embassy and also the Slovak financial group Penta. The respondents frequently mentioned that other politicians from the coalition headed by SMER-SD directly addressed such comments towards them during press-conferences, or in their videos or posts on social media; and the comments were then echoed by the general public on social media, particularly in the comment sections of the given respondent’s or other politicians’ posts.

In close relation to the mode of semiotic violence which attempts to discredit women aligned with progressive and democratic values, the respondents also mentioned further frequent attacks and abuse in the online space targeting them for representing values connected to gender-equality, progressivism, or the European Union. In the interviews the respondents reported that many of the attacks, perpetrated mostly by men, were triggered by their outspoken support of gender-equality, feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and Ukraine, but in three instances also by their use of gender-sensitive language. Common themes in these acts of violence are accusations of being lesbians and engaging in sexual acts with other female colleagues, of being transgender, or of looking like a man and having manly features. Accusations targeting women’s gender identity, supposedly unfeminine appearance or sexual orientation are commonly directed toward women politicians due to the supposed role incongruity between the stereotypical characteristics of femininity associated with being a woman and the characteristics deemed as necessary for being a leader (EAGLY & KARAU, 2002; SCHNEIDER & BOS, 2014; SPORTELLI & D’ERRICO, 2025).

Other examples of attacks where women’s gender and value systems intersect include reactions to their support for Ukraine in the war of Russian aggression, where, for example, they are asked to go fight in the war, or attacks in relation to gender equality – for example, one perpetrator

rhetorically demanded that the given woman carry a fridge up four flights of stairs alone. Another respondent mentioned that when one advocates for human rights and inclusion of migrants, incitement to sexual violence and rape on social media often follows, which showcases a common strategy of far-right parties, namely that of portraying immigrant men as sexual predators, and women who support them as thus deserving of rape or “asking for it” (KÖTTIG & SIGL, 2020; SARRASIN ET AL., 2015).

The use of language was described both as a trigger and as a tool to discipline the respondents for their supposed transgressions. One respondent shared that she is frequently targeted for not using the traditional Slovak ending of female last names -ová, which is traditionally added to the male form of the last name and clearly genders the person as female. More women have been choosing not to add the ending to their name, as linguistically it represents a relationship of belonging and it could potentially also result in discrimination by gender, as a person's gender is thus easily inferred from their last name. One respondent said that her harassers frequently add it to her name to correct it, or accuse her of not being knowledgeable about Slovak grammar or making up the possibility to use her chosen last name as such:

They do it either by adding the “ová” to my name and telling me that’s what I should be called, and that if I don’t have it [the ending] there, then I’m just making it up, that I’m not following the rules of grammar and stuff like that, or, on the other hand, by attacking me sexually and asking me if I’m really a woman, or a surgically altered man, if I’m a transsexual.

There were also public cases where male members of the parliament misgendered women whose last names do not have the female ending despite working with them for months (JEDLEE PRODUCTIONS, 2025; TOP Z NRSR, 2023). This can also be seen as a practice of discipline where women are publicly humiliated and punished for not adhering to traditions associated with the Slovak language and culture, and thus these acts of violence are linked to attacks targeting the values of progressivism and gender-equality.

Three other respondents mentioned the use of gender sensitive and inclusive language as a trigger for abusive behaviour in the online space, particularly from older men (RUILOBA-NÚÑEZ & GOENAGA RUIZ DE ZUAZU, 2024).

The Slovak language is gendered, with nouns, adjectives, and verb conjugations all having a gendered ending. Furthermore, the traditionally generic masculine form of nouns and pronouns is considered default and neutral. The use of gender inclusive and gender sensitive language is usually put into practice by adding more forms of nouns or verbs or using gender-neutral nouns which are not in the generic masculine form. Several respondents mentioned that men respond by “mansplaining” (described as such by the respondents) when gender inclusive language is used in articles or on social media. One respondent described it as follows:

Recently, for example, I have repeatedly received messages, presumably from older men, who were very upset that I use gender-sensitive language. The emails were relatively polite, but there was always a subliminal message stating that this was the result of some frustration or trauma on my part, or some other personal issue, and that I should deal with it elsewhere and not by using gender-sensitive language.

Such reactions can be read as expressions of anger at women for becoming visible and wishes to erase them again, since gender inclusive language is seen as something abnormal, something foreign to Slovak culture and traditions, much like the other values these women represent, which are associated with progressive and pro-European values. Inclusive language is seen as empowering and political by those who use it because it underscores the presence and visibility of women in public and political spaces, but it can also be used to discipline individuals for their perceived transgressions against the standard and traditional form of the given language.

Intersectional acts of gender-based violence, including attacks on one’s ethnicity, ethnic minority belonging or sexual orientation, were reported as being particularly hurtful by the respondents. Ethnic minority belonging and minority sexual orientation were present in both the motives and forms of the attacks and acts of violence:

I make no secret of the fact that part of my family is Jewish, so they [the perpetrators] often bring it up, but, uh, it’s more or less just a photo collage sometimes; one reader even sent me one by mail, where he pasted my photo onto the body of a naked fat woman.

A respondent who identifies as Roma, identified three groups of attacks: racist attacks, then personalised gendered attacks targeting her appearance, ethnicity, or competencies and, lastly, attacks targeting the value system she represents politically. She holds that the attacks targeting her Roma ethnicity are the most violent and vulgar:

When it comes to the Roma people and community, it's totally hateful, and you can feel much more hatred and resistance there [in the attacks]. The specific topic, they don't even focus on it anymore. Uh, [they focus] not so much on me as on the whole topic of Roma inclusion or inclusion in general. It's as if they think that you are actually representing or personifying the whole community.

She further mentioned being held responsible for the problems the Roma minority is facing as well as being accused of being a “mutant” and being denied her Roma ethnicity because of allegedly being too educated for a Roma person. This demonstrates that some attacks are motivated by a supposed role incongruity between being a member of an ethnic minority and being a politician.

Another respondent frequently receives aggressive homophobic and transphobic messages but also fake images of herself with fabricated transphobic quotes. She described these attacks as particularly damaging for herself because she is the one going through all her messages and posts personally without any support from her assistants, as she considers that it is her responsibility to be in contact with her followers, but also for the followers, the majority of whom are queer: “I take care of my own social media; it is important for me to ensure safety for people who trust me and have certain expectations.” The attacks are motivated by her queer identity but also by her advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in her political work. Another respondent shared that the most intense attacks she received were triggered by her expertise on migration and motivated by her relationship with a foreigner, with the attacks peaking around the period of the refugee crises in 2015. These examples of intersectional acts of violence underscore that belonging in or having a relationship with a minority makes one vulnerable to gendered attacks which target the intersectionality in both the motive and form of the violent acts as well as oftentimes applying double standards to the individuals. One respondent

summarised the related responsibility as follows: “I have to prove myself twice as much as other women because I am underestimated both for being a woman and for being Roma.”

At the same time, experiences of intersectional violence lead to a significant loss of expertise; because many individuals focus on advocating for the rights of the minority or community they belong to or have ties to – the LGBTQ+ community, migrants, or the Roma minority, they are targeted both for their belonging to the said group and for their professional advocacy, policy, and political work. Their experiences with such personalised violence may result in their making a decision to specialise in another area in their political work. Two respondents whose experiences were discussed above now focus on completely different areas than in the past due to the severity and personal character of the attacks they sustained. Such a loss of expertise negatively affects governance, public policy, representation, and advocacy for minority and human rights.

MOTHERS, POLITICIANS AND JOURNALISTS: THE CONTINUED SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DIVIDE

In this section the continued relevance of the public/private divide for women’s participation in public life, namely in the arena of politics and journalism, will be discussed. Women’s roles as mothers and caretakers will be elaborated on, initially in relation to the gendered forms and contents of the related attacks and later by looking at them as a relevant category for analysing the impacts of violence on women’s motivation and decisions to stay publicly active. Lastly, some individual narratives of women’s personal strength and motivation will be identified and discussed. When recounting their experiences with attacks and harassment, several respondents mentioned that attacks and threats targeting their families and especially their children, or attacks against them in the presence of their children are the most hurtful and damaging. These attacks are also the ones they consider the most threatening for their safety. One respondent shared this experience:

Those attacks, I don’t know if they can get any rougher than the ones I’ve experienced. The fact is that part of the attacks included threats made against my children, so it really has nothing to do with my work and they are small children

that nobody has ever seen or heard of and yet they were often threatened. I think that's probably the most vulnerable area for a politician and I don't want to make a distinction now between women and men but I guess in some ways, when they say that to a politician who is a mother against her minor children, it's very hurtful. It's very painful. And, uh, after these attacks, I don't know if anything has surpassed them, I have to admit, in the online space.

Another respondent similarly mentioned that when the harassment takes place in person, rather than online, and in the presence of her young daughter, it gets to her much more and makes her think about the boundary between the attacks being bearable and the attacks being too much. The thought of her daughter's possible future in Slovakia makes her consider potentially moving abroad. Moreover, threats against children and family members brought several respondents to report the incidents to the police and press charges, which underscores the severity of the attacks against family for the women concerned, and oftentimes these were the only incidents they officially reported to the authorities.

Furthermore, eight respondents mentioned that they are concerned about the mental health, wellbeing, and safety of their families, especially their parents and children, when it comes to acts of violence. Four respondents shared examples of times when their parents, families, or municipal office received hateful and threatening letters about them. Several respondents mentioned that they worry about the vicarious trauma inflicted on their families, and to protect them, they advise them not to read any social media posts or comments that target them:

From the very beginning, I have been warning my family not to read the discussions under my articles or reactions on Facebook. But of course, my sister reads them and is often frightened by it. My more distant family often tell me that they are afraid for me and express their support, but they also have concerns because, of course, these people imagine the situation to be even worse than it is.

Similarly, when asked about their motivation to continue to be publicly involved, multiple interviewed women mentioned that if their families and children were in danger because of their political or journalistic activity, they would end their career. These responses must be considered in the context of the decision of then President Čaputová not to run

for a second term of presidency, which was made public shortly before the interviews were conducted. Čaputová's family, especially her daughters, were common targets of attacks and Čaputová even mentioned the attacks on her family as a reason not to continue her political career and described them as unfair, unacceptable, and devastating for the entire society (BALOGOVÁ, 2023). These examples demonstrate that attacks on families and children of publicly active women are extremely efficient in threatening them and limiting their participation. By threatening or targeting their families, the perpetrators remind the women of their rightful place – in the home and taking care of their families, and the threats and violence should be understood as a punishment for transgressing the public/private divide and claiming a presence and voice in the public sphere. These examples underscore the continued relevance of the public/private divide as an analytical category for studying women's participation on two levels: on the level of the motives and forms of the attacks targeting children and families, but especially on the level of the impacts, where women read and understand the attacks as threatening and dangerous and base their decisions about the future on them. Therefore, in targeting women as mothers, the perpetrators use gendered forms and motives of attacking women as mothers with gendered impacts of limiting and threatening their willingness to stay publicly active and participate.

The impacts of attacks aimed at families are compounded by a lack of targeted and effective reporting and protection mechanisms available to women politicians and journalists. As mentioned above, in extreme cases women report acts of violence and attacks to the police, especially when they involve death threats, but the investigation and prosecution are often lengthy. One respondent filed a claim against her stalker, whose identity was known, but the process leading to his sentencing took two years and she had to provide printed copies of all electronic communication she received from him. Several respondents mentioned that in the past they used to report grievous threats to an official channel of the Ministry of Justice in charge of investigating and prosecuting extremism, but after the 2023 election, the branch is not functional. When asked about other mechanisms or resources available for reporting or protection, the respondents expressed a general consensus that reporting directly on online platforms is ineffective and time-consuming. One respondent said: "Only about 5% of what I report is ruled as violating the Community

Standards and is removed.” And another stated: “I have zero trust in institutions.” One extreme example was that of a respondent who created a collage of the different violent content she received to raise awareness of gendered violence only for the post to be blocked by the platform for violating the community rules. Only one respondent mentioned a targeted mechanism for journalists to report severe acts of violence as well as the available psychological support provided by her employer, which demonstrates an institutional recognition of violence targeting journalists, even if it is not gender-sensitive. Considering the lack of or insufficient reporting and protection mechanisms, an individualisation of responsibility for dealing with the attacks and violence has been identified in the form of a prominent narrative of personal strength, resilience and a strong mindset among the women respondents, and it was limited only by their families being targeted by the attacks.

Whereas there is a general recognition of the harmful and damaging character and consequences of gendered attacks against publicly active women, on a personal level most of the respondents cite their unique strength of character, mindset, or approach to life which enables them to cope with violence without severe negative consequences. “Online hate doesn’t affect me; it’s a matter of conscious decision,” “I feel like I have it under control and it doesn’t affect me much,” and “I steeled myself against it” are just some of the sentences uttered during the interviews. In two cases, the respondents revealed that their previous experiences with intense waves of violence gave them the strength and tools to deal with it in the future. One respondent suffered a mental breakdown after receiving death threats aimed at her and her children, which made her stop her advocacy and political work for two years, but she now reflects on the experience as follows: “I focused more on my work with children, but it also helped me to detach myself from those things and learn to cope with them. So now it didn’t catch me off guard and I wasn’t surprised.”

Interestingly, some women combine and link their unique strength and ability to withstand violence and attacks with not wanting to reveal their vulnerability and the impacts of the violence on them:

I'm saying, like, I accept it all as part of the job. It's just that a lot of times I get so hung up on the fact that actually, I understand that there's a lot of evil in society, but I don't actually want to talk about it [my experiences]. I don't even want to put it out there because it doesn't stop the evil, it just multiplies it, and there's no one to protect you and so we're kind of on our own; and at the same time, it's like I think that's why a lot of women either don't go into politics or when they do, they just give up and leave. I'm just not that sensitive piece of the puzzle.

This quote reveals the complex processes at play when it comes to coping with violence – the respondent feels that sharing her experiences and vulnerability could trigger further attacks against her or other women, as she recognises the structural character of violence against women, but at the same time sets herself apart from the others by claiming that she is “not that sensitive piece of the puzzle”. Another respondent shared how her understanding of the expectations people have of their political representatives affects what she is willing to share on social media, even when it conflicts with her internal preferences and motivations:

[...] sometimes I would like to use those social networks for a practical purpose – for example, [I could use them when] I don't know something, I'm looking for a recommendation for something, or I'm looking for a massage at a doctor's office or something, but I've learned not to show my weaknesses on those social networks, like in that sense, although I feel like it is very much part of my belief that we're not supposed to come off as indestructible workaholics. Unfortunately, even that is sort of judged: that we're expected to work here, and we're not entitled to go on vacations. We're not entitled to any sort of complaint; it's some sort of expectation of us.

A different respondent revealed her inner conflict when it comes to coping with such attacks: on one hand, she makes an effort to separate and ignore the negative content, but on the other hand she revealed an internalisation of the contents of the attacks aimed at her appearance when she mentioned that she actively works on improving her physical appearance with the hope of limiting the amount of attacks targeting it.

Collective meaning-making processes have been identified in understanding violence against women as a structural issue, but also when it comes to the recognition of violence as part of coordinated and targeted patterns. Most of the respondents identified the existence of coordinated and intense patterns of violence following specific events or periods of

political tensions, and this violence was often perpetrated or amplified by other political actors in the online and offline space. The respondents were oftentimes openly named and mentioned as culprits of certain negatively perceived events during press conferences or in videos posted on the social media channels of politicians, political parties, and individuals associated with them. Alternatively, the perpetrators directly shared social media content of the respondents in private groups, on private channels or via posts with messages of public incitement of further harassment.

Four respondents, three of them Members of Parliament, remember intense periods of online violence and harassment as having a severe impact on their careers. During her political career, one respondent was repeatedly accused of being directly responsible for the death of a public figure. The respondent was accused of being a murderer, and called a “torturer” or a “prison guard.” She was first targeted by oppositional politicians, and then by the general society. She describes the situation as follows:

And I was labelled as the culprit, so people also wrote to me that I was a murderer and that this would catch up with me, and they still write to me, but the harshest messages were triggered right afterwards. Unfortunately, that misinformation spread incredibly quickly: that there was going to be a murder and that the person in question was going to be martyred and I couldn’t counter it or even, like, prevent it from spreading really, incredibly quickly.

The severity and intensity of the attacks, which, according to the respondent, were directly encouraged by politicians writing hateful articles: “They were actually encouraging people and their voters to carry on in this way. So yes, they got a lot of incentives there for those people to actually do that and they have them even today, unfortunately.” These events led her to completely withdraw from social media for almost three years, during which she did not read any messages or comment sections, or even receive notifications on her phone. She only started to be active on social media again right before the 2023 election campaign. Another respondent identified paid troll accounts as the main perpetrators of abusive comments and she directly linked them to political figures and their activities: “Most of these attacks come from paid troll profiles; I am convinced that the government, and therefore coalition politicians, are working with many such paid trolls to systematically attack journalists in this way.”

Another example of an intense wave of violence and harassment lasting several years was the one experienced by a respondent working in public administration in the field of gender equality at the time of the increasing backlash against gender equality. The violence and harassment started after Slovakia published its first Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights and Gender Equality and signed the Istanbul Convention. The respondent reported that there were increasing pressures targeting her professional and private life during this period. There was a public petition against her, a conservative non-governmental organisation pressed criminal charges against her, and personalised letters attacking her professionally were sent to her place of employment. She also faced accusations of fraud because of her self-employment and had her home address made public, which is an example of doxxing. She describes the attacks as “very personalised, with the intention to scare and demotivate me.” In the end, the mounting pressures and disagreements with her leadership led her to resign and completely withdraw from public life, including social media, despite previously being actively engaged in it. Furthermore, after 15 years of working in the field of gender equality, she completely changed her career. Withdrawal from social media and public discourse is closely related to self-censorship, which is a common consequence of online violence (BECK ET AL., 2022; KOCH ET AL., 2025).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirmed that women politicians and journalists are attacked in gendered ways with the acts of violence commonly targeting their appearance, sexuality, personal life, age, or gender identity (IPU ET AL., 2025; VRIELINK & VAN DER PAS, 2024). In the context of current Slovakia they are most often attacked in connection with the progressive values they represent. These acts of violence employ semiotic violence to attack and discredit women by using context-dependent, politically charged tropes depicting them as “traitors,” “prostitutes,” or “agents of foreign powers.” Such labels sexualise, denigrate, and humiliate women as “prostitutes” or “whores” or portray them as subservient by calling them “agents,” “servants,” or “Soros’s girls,” which implies that they are dependent, corruptible, and unable to make autonomous decisions. In these accusations, women are rendered passive and subordinate to more powerful actors, typically the government, powerful men, or a foreign entity, who/which are presumed to influence, sponsor, and dictate their actions.

According to Krook (²⁰²², p. 375), semiotic violence entails “drawing on and reinforcing gender inequalities by using words and images – and in some cases, body language – to injure, discipline, and subjugate women.” She identifies two primary modes of semiotic violence: rendering women invisible and rendering women incompetent. These examples fit within this framework but also reveal a distinct, context-specific variation.

In the context of this research, women politicians and journalists are symbolically linked with foreign values and positioned in opposition to national values, and are thereby constructed as enemies of the state. Such harassment aligns with Bardall’s argument that women are especially vulnerable to attacks based on morality – in which they are portrayed as both sexually deviant and ideologically disloyal (²⁰¹³). These narratives further humiliate and subordinate women by objectifying them linguistically and associating them with active external agents such as “George Soros,” “Brussels,” or “the US Embassy.”

To capture these dynamics, a specific mode of semiotic violence is proposed here: rendering women discredited and disgraced. This reflects how sexualised and nationalist tropes combine to delegitimise women in politics. This strategy merges misogynistic language with conservative rhetoric to depict women, particularly those representing pro-European Union and pro-democratic values, as both morally corrupt and politically treacherous. In doing so, it combines violence against women in politics with broader patterns of political violence employed to undermine democratic opposition.

Against the backdrop of the anti-gender movement, acts of violence also commonly target women’s gender identity and sexual orientation in multiple ways: by directly misgendering them in spoken interaction, accusing them of being lesbians or transgender women, and using incorrect pronouns or changing their last names to align with traditional rules of correct grammar and language use. Some attacks were also triggered by women’s use of gender-sensitive and inclusive language or the gender-neutral form of their last name.

Further analysis of the recurrent themes revealed the continued significance of the public/private divide in the forms of the attacks, but, most importantly, in their impacts. Verloo and Lombardo (²⁰⁰⁷) claim

that: “[t]he public/private division is a key dimension of the conceptualizations of the main structures that contribute to maintain and reproduce gender inequality.” In this particular case, by entering public life, women bridge the public/private divide, which oftentimes becomes a reason for gendered attacks aimed at the women’s children or families. This can be read as a strategy to discipline them for their transgression of the public/private divide. The women’s interpretations of these attacks hints at an internalisation of the public/private divide, which attests to its continued significance. Their ability to protect and shelter their families from the violence becomes the deciding factor for their willingness and motivation to continue their public presence and engagement. Moreover, attacks on their family and children are often the only violent acts women report to the authorities. This tension between women’s public and private roles underscores their interconnectedness and the artificiality of their separation (PATEMAN, 1987).

The analysis of coping mechanisms and meaning-making strategies revealed a persistent gap and divide between the collective and individual levels. All 14 of the respondents recognised that gender-based violence and attacks against publicly active women are a structural problem, which was underscored by all of them making a reference to the attacks perpetrated against President Čaputová as well as the journalist Zuzana Kovačič-Hanzelová, who at that time made the public decision to take a break from her journalistic career in response to the attacks against her (KOVAČIČ HANZELOVÁ, 2024). All the respondents therefore acknowledged that attacks against women in the public sphere have a direct impact on women’s public participation, and they openly and often publicly denounced them and expressed their support to the affected women.

At the same time, on the individual level, when it comes to coping with personal experiences of violence, narratives of the individual’s ability to cope, and of their unique strength, character and mindset prevail. The responsibility to cope with violence is individualised, and the violence is dealt with privately and silently, and discussed only after a certain amount of time has passed and the problem has been resolved. However, some respondents reveal their hesitation to show vulnerability and publicly reveal the violence they experience and especially the toll it takes. Interestingly, most of the respondents talk about and denounce violence when it is targeted at other women, but only those women who have decided

to step away from their public role openly discuss the violence they experienced. These reservations about showing vulnerability and disclosing the extent and impacts of the violence one suffered highlight the internalisation of the public/private divide by the respondents themselves. Nevertheless, there are emerging practices of resistance and solidarity in this regard, such as the play *I Will Cut Your Head Off*, which premiered on International Women's Day in 2024 (DPOH CONTENT, 2024) and consisted of a theatrical reading of the attacks and harassment aimed at the then president Čaputová, or the public petition "Let's Say No to Harassment and Humiliation of Women," initiated by MPs from the oppositional Freedom and Solidarity party (DENNÍK N, 2024; POVEDZME NIE URÁŽKAM A PONIŽOVANIU ŽIEN, N.D.).

The findings demonstrate that existing legislation and institutional mechanisms frequently fail to effectively respond to gender-based violence against women in public life. The absence of adequate support, combined with targeted attacks that are often extended to their children and families, reinforces narratives of women's individual resilience and ability to cope with violence despite a shared awareness that gender-based violence against publicly active women is a structural problem. Moreover, the analysis shows that gender-based violence also operates as a deliberate political strategy used to harass, silence, and ultimately drive some women from public life. Such violence is not only perpetrated by anonymous actors but also incited or endorsed by political figures themselves. Gendered acts of violence then become part of broader de-democratisation strategies to repress political opposition, independent media, and civil society actors advocating for human rights and equality. This underscores the urgent need for robust EU-level mechanisms capable of addressing state-sponsored or state-tolerated abuse as well as a variety of targeted protection and support mechanisms for affected women on national and civil society level.

This research expanded the scholarship on violence against women in politics by situating the Slovak case within the wider trends of democratic backsliding and anti-gender movements, thus bridging these two research strands. It identified the key tropes and strategies used to target women critical of the government, especially the use of semiotic violence to render women discredited and disgraced. It shifted the analytical focus from whether gender explicitly motivates such attacks to how distinctly gendered their forms and consequences are, as the attacks ultimately undermine democratic participation, diversity, expertise and representation.

The main limitations of this research stem from the context-dependent findings about the experiences of gender-based violence by women who represent pro-European Union and democratic values as well as the current socio-political context. This context affects women's willingness to participate in such a research, as they may possibly fear the repercussions of their participation, and this fear can potentially lead to self-censorship during the interviews. Further research is needed to reflect and account for the experiences of women from across the whole political spectrum and a wider selection of media. Similarly, further academic engagement in this area could explore the individualisation of the responsibility to cope with violence among some women and how this relates to solidarity and (un)available targeted mechanisms for reporting, investigation, and support.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The quotes presented in the article don't include names, pseudonyms or information about the respondent's political party or employer, but due to the small number of respondents and their unique identities and circumstances, which were mentioned during the interviews, the full anonymity of all the respondents cannot be guaranteed.

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