



Submission
from
See Her Elected
to the
Task Force on
Safe Participation
in Public Life

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Executive Summary

See Her Elected (SHE) is a nation-wide programme supporting women in rural Ireland into local government. We do so through our award-winning and innovative SHESchool which offers free online political education aimed at demystifying local politics for women. SHE wrote and published Ireland's first *Guide to Running in the Local Elections*. Practical workshops which are free and run once a month are designed to follow the Guidebook chapters. We are currently working with women from across Ireland who, as candidates and campaign team members, are aiming to bring gender balance into rural county councils. By surveying this cohort of women to prepare a response to the Task Force, See Her Elected is providing you with a unique, current and predominantly rural perspective on safe participation in public life from women who are actively preparing for the local elections.

An important opening point by way of information is that in SHE election workshops, when abuse and harassment are the topics of conversation, they do not emerge as an absolute deterrent. On the contrary, it often acts as a catalyst and hardens resolve to enter local politics. The reasoning offered by women themselves is simply **that if women don't run, nothing will change**.

We phrased our survey questions to closely align with the Task Force's terms of reference. Incidences of abuse were catalogued by 52% of respondents, with 46% never having encountered abuse or harassment. (2% were unsure). A theme emerging from the descriptions of abuse was the prominence of intra-party instances including poor chairing of meetings. This signals that **political parties are critical actors** in helping to realise the Task Force's ambitions. Measures involving education on the value of political participation received strong support, with some concern expressed about negative messaging on abuse being counterproductive to the aim of more women in local government. Measures around public policy and legislation were almost unanimously welcomed. Of note are a number of observations on legislation being meaningless if the cost of litigation places it out of reach to women impacted.

The role of social media platforms invoked ire at the lack of accountability, with strong scepticism expressed at their commitment to safety for those in political life. The strength of the response indicates a **prioritisation of attention to the role of social media platforms**. Support for measures by the Houses of the Oireachtas and Parties was tempered somewhat by uncertainty at the effectiveness of a Dublin-based response at the local level in rural Ireland. A demand that the current members of the Oireachtas lead by example in promoting civil discourse in public life was to the fore in responses.

Our submission concludes with further ideas that women in rural Ireland would like to see the Task Force consider. We draw attention to calls for a central point of contact to call as and when abuse unfolds, and questions about why home addresses are required on nomination papers.

Thank you for your invitation to make a written submission. We extend our gratitude to the women who gave their time to make thoughtful and considered responses to our survey to aid the Task Force's deliberations. The See Her Elected Team wish the Task Force success in their undertaking.

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Introduction to See Her Elected

In May 2019 Irish local government elections were held with 1,980 candidates vying for 949 council seats in all 31 county and city councils. Of those successful, just 226 were women. This meant that an entrenched pattern of the over-representation of men was set to continue for yet another local election cycle with the number of women county and city councillors not exceeding 24% of the total. However, this figure obscures a severe and persistent pattern of under-representation of women in rural constituencies. The Dublin-centred local authorities have significant numbers of female councillors, with women forming between 35% and 50% of the elected council. Outside of Dublin and its surrounding counties, the number of male councillors exceeds women by some margin. This is particularly acute in rural Ireland. For example, following the 2019 local elections, 95% of the councillors elected in Longford were men. In Donegal, 89% of the councillors are men.

Concern at the under-representation of women in rural county councils was the catalyst for the formation of the See Her Elected (SHE) programme in 2019. SHE is part of Longford Women's Link, a social enterprise in County Longford who work to ensure that women in Longford can fulfil their potential in a safe and equal society. SHE is a joint initiative between Longford Women's Link and 50:50 North West (a group who advocate for equal representation for men and women in Irish politics, particularly in the North West of the Ireland). The programme is funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. **SHE is a nation-wide feminist programme supporting women in rural Ireland into local government.**

Scholarship addressing the under-representation of women in politics generally draws attention to demand and supply explanations¹. Of particular interest to SHE are supply-side research findings which study reasons for gender differences in the emergence of candidates. These show gender differences in how confident women and men are that they have the relevant skills and knowledge to be viable candidates. Underpinning SHE's approach to supporting women into local political life is a desire to address this gendered self-perceived weakness in political knowledge. Our solution is SHESchool.

SHESchool

SHESchool aims to demystify local government for women and provides them with everything they need to know about developing and implementing a comprehensive local election campaign. SHESchool is free and is conducted primarily online. We are committed to the principles of women's community education, meaning the design of SHESchool evolves in response to learners' identified needs and asks.

Our SHESchool introductory political education classes help demystify local politics for women and explain how politics and voting are structured in Ireland. From there, women interested in learning how elections work, and who may see themselves as candidates or

¹ (Buckley, 2020, p.350)

campaign team members, join our election workshops. These workshops are structured around the *See Her Elected Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections*².

We wrote Ireland's first *Guide to Running in the Local Elections* for two reasons. Firstly, it didn't exist. Writing it was a direct response to questions from women in SHESchool about where to start if you weren't from a political family, or in a political party. Secondly, it met the demand from women for a clear practical pathway that they could follow that was focused on local elections in rural constituencies. Our Guidebook is free to download from our website and a free copy is given to all women in our election workshops.

Our election workshops are designed to follow the chapters of the *Guidebook* and we run the same workshops on four consecutive days each month, but at different times to provide as much flexibility as possible to fit in with women's lives.

In 2021 SHE won the prestigious Innovation in Politics Award in the democracy category for SHESchool. It was the first time the award was won by an Irish project and recognised the local and rural emphasis within SHE, and our innovative practices.

SHE has grown from 46 women who attended the first Introduction to Politics class in 2020, to over 1,000 women having attended SHESchool to date, with many more involved in SHE collaborations with local authorities in promoting gender and diversity in local government as well as our secondary schools programme.

We have commenced writing our Guidebook's 2nd edition, the *See Her Elected Guide to Running in the 2029 Local Elections*, which captures the learning from the current election cycle.

² <https://www.seeherelected.ie/booklet-a-guide-to-running-in-the-2024-local-elections/>

Method

See Her Elected believe that it is vital that the voices of the women in SHESchool are made available to the Task Force to assist them in their deliberations. It provides a unique and current perspective on safe participation in political life. Moreover, it is a rural perspective, coming directly from a cohort of women predominantly from rural Ireland who are actively preparing for local elections.

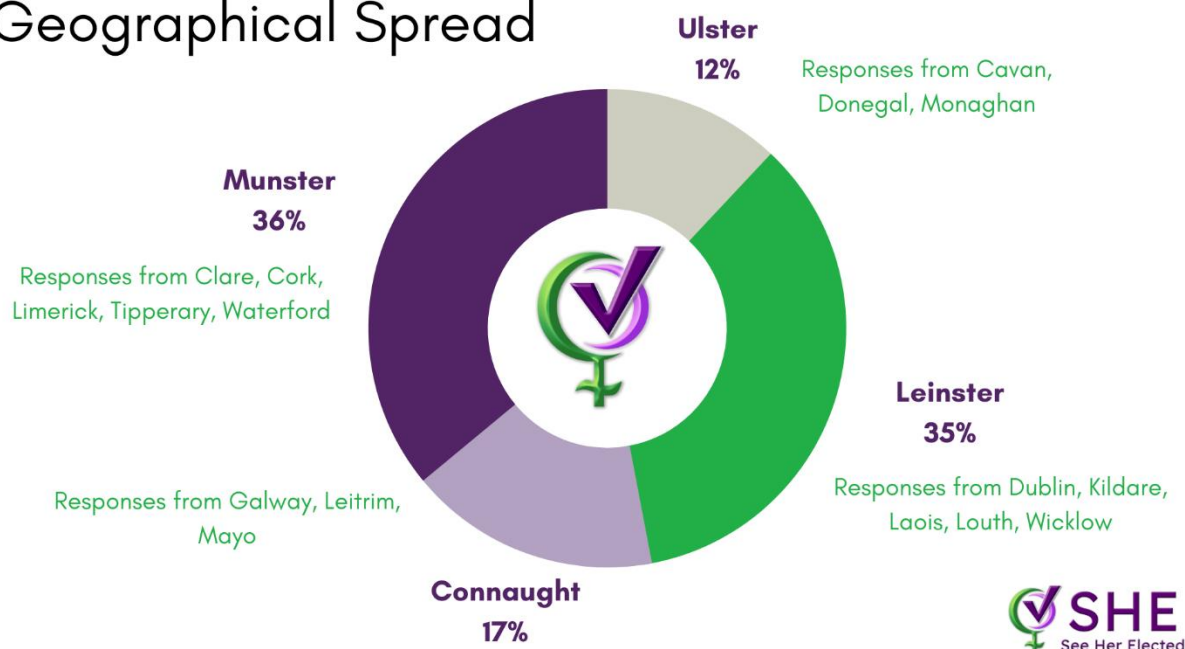
Given the four-week timeframe in the summer holiday period (July-August 2023), we decided the most efficient manner to inform our response was to issue a short survey with the aim of addressing the Task Force's terms of reference as set out in correspondence with us dated 18th July 2023. A copy of the survey is at Appendix 1.

We flagged in the email and at the beginning of the survey that the content referenced abuse and asked women not to continue if the subject matter was uncomfortable or upsetting for them.

Our survey sample was 144 women from SHESchool who are actively working with the support of SHE on local election campaigns. None are presently councillors. We emailed an online survey on 25th July 2023 and left it open for two weeks. The survey was completed anonymously. We had a response rate of 30%. Given the timing of the request and the content warning, we remain satisfied that this is a sufficient response to capture the perspectives of women predominantly from rural local electoral areas who are getting ready to be part of the 2024 and 2029 local elections as candidates and campaign team members.

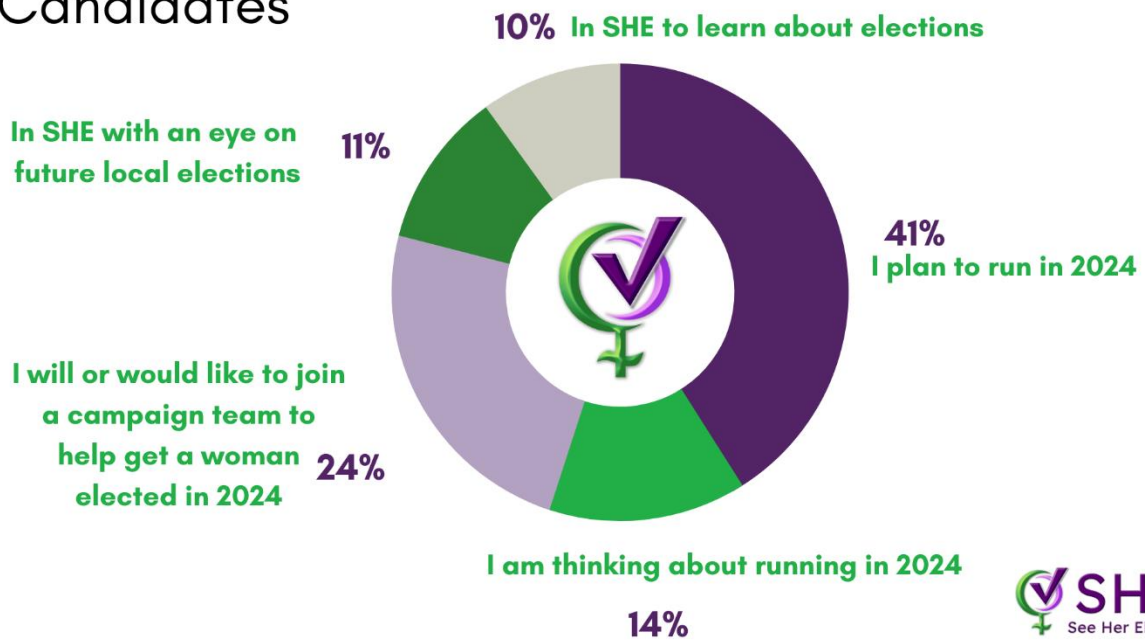
Profile of Respondents

Geographical Spread



We asked women how they would best describe themselves. 66% of respondents are planning to run in 2024 or seriously considering it and/or plan to run in 2029.

Candidates



Results and Analysis

The interactive nature of See Her Elected workshops lends itself to open conversations about the realities of running in local elections. Safety is a topic we discuss, and See Her Elected provides targeted practical training on staying safe online, digital self-defence and coaching to build confidence and resilience for women ahead of selection conventions and campaigns.

We can confirm that women acknowledge that abuse, online abuse, and harassment happens, **but that it is not considered an absolute deterrent**. Instead, there is a recognition that those who perpetrate abuse and harassment are people who believe women have no place in politics. This in turn acts as a catalyst to continue. A typical SHE workshop conclusion, when we discuss safety, is that **if women don't run in local elections, nothing will ever change**.

It is important to state this from the outset, as it is a perspective not captured in the Task Force's terms of reference, and consequently, not in our survey.

Prevalence and Nature of Abuse

We commenced by asking women if they had experienced any form of abuse as a result of their current participation in political life (whether as a potential candidate or as a woman active in their community or around a particular issue). We provided the HSE definitions of abuse by way of guidance, see Appendix 1.

52% of respondents answered yes to the question, 46% said no and 2% were unsure.

With regard to the nature of what happened, we present the answers exactly as given to us except to exclude names and specific events that might identify a respondent.

I was laughed at and told my husband would be better for the job. I was given out to and told it wouldn't be fair on my children and I was told that I don't have the looks for politics

An incident of a man touching my breast

Via social media platforms and from people in the community who disagree with my positions or activism

I have been verbally abused and accused of misappropriation of funds as a result of my work in [named sector]. I took legal advice and ceased all interaction with the abuser.

I also get followed on socials by a number of bot accounts. Sometimes I block them if I can be bothered. It's about 1-2 every day

Online abuse due to my video on the staff shortages in a nursing home in [named town]. I was offering my help [named reason]. The abuse was compounded by 3 videos that called by a liar by 3 local representatives. I got messages saying "we know where you live" to being a liar, to being called a fat f##k etc

Various verbal abuse and unsolicited advances from men

During the 2019 LE canvas and 2020 GE canvass (canvassing for other candidates, not myself) I was verbally assaulted by a member of my own local political structure and my [named relative] was threatened with physical violence. This was in a public place in front of the GE candidate. [Named relative] didn't respond and others stepped in to remove the man. He was subsequently suspended from the party

A complete refusal to call me by my proper name on multiple occasions or bypassing/trivialising my contribution

I openly said at a political meeting I was thinking of going for election. I was accosted twice the following week by elected candidate and a supporter because in their opinion I would split the vote

Verbal abuse/disrespect from a party colleague, ongoing basis. In person, on phone and on texts/group chats

Men messaging me in inappropriate suggestions and trying to arrange meets with false reasons

Harrasment at a public meeting for my campaign

Received derogatory comments on social media in relation to a community campaign that I started and lead. A few comments about needing a man to come in and run things and comments about how I should be working on baby number 4 after giving birth to my thirdchild.

Physically slapped at a door canvassing

Letters/Emails - intimidating and using demeaning language

Social media mainly with obnoxious comments

Being shouted at and told to leave politics to men

I was previously a county councillor and received threatening phonecalls and particularly targeted as a woman to intimidate on issues like coursing, county development levies and in general during the campaign trail. Other women can be particularly vicious and persistent as if they think they are untouchable as a harrasser being a woman.

Phone calls accusing me of things I had not done

As a new chairperson in a [named local amenity] the previous chair has been verbally abusive and humiliating. Twitter posts by me resulted in abusive remarks - one following a picture at an anti hate rally and regarding pollution of a river!

Meetings - attack on character, point of view dismissed, organising a majority to gang up, shouting, demeaning language, making decisions outside of the official meeting, holding meetings outside of the official meeting

Online abuse in supporting another person. Some comments towards the candidate based on her ethnicity and skin colour and the reference to me in negative language as being pro migrant and not supporting Irish people

I was baited into a discussion on trans rights and then threatened with slander after confirming my support. I am yet to see any action taken in this regard, Bait and threat were via email with fake accounts

A theme emerging from the responses is the instances of abuse that occur within the setting of political party meetings, and/or involves political party members. **This requires attention from political parties who need to lead by example and demonstrate their opposition to abuse and harassment in any form by and between members.** The conduct of meetings is

described in a number of responses in a way that suggests as a minimum, parties need to pay attention to inadequate chairing abilities, and especially ensuring those chairing a meeting have the ability to recognise and address attempts of gender-biased commentary and discourse.

What is your opinion on Measure 1: Raising awareness

including through education and training, of the value of political participation and public service and of the detrimental impact of abuse, including online abuse, and harassment in deterring political participation across Irish society.

There was strong support for this measure with 85% of respondents agreeing with it, albeit with differing levels of enthusiasm ranging from 'would be helpful' and 'very good' to 'vital', 'crucial', and capable of 'changing the tide'. It was recognised as an important measure for those currently under-represented in local government, for example, one contribution saw this measure as 'crucial to increase awareness and empower women by providing support for those who come from diverse backgrounds but are essential members of society'.

Recognition for politicians' efforts and workload was offered. One response expressed an opinion that 'there needs to be more praise of and respect for public representatives.'. Another in expressing support for this measure as 'important' added that:

It really saddens me that people who decide to use their working lives to help others get so much negative abuse. I have seen comments on politicians I follow and I think it's so sad. Other public figures (actors/broadcasters/bloggers) get very little in comparison and yet politicians are in caring kind roles every day.

Another respondent noted that:

I don't think the public realise the amount of boards and therefore the services and institutions that would not function without councillors being mandatorily co-opted eg. ETBs and Regional Health Fora.

Some respondents indicated agreement with this as a measure but expressed reservations. The following answers capture the perspectives of those who had reservations.

I think in general we need to make everyone more aware of the benefits of being involved in politics and how our day-to-day lives are impacted by politics. I don't know how much of an impact highlighting the detrimental impact of abuse and online abuse and harassment will have. Everyone knows that they are negative things that have negative impacts.

And:

Awareness raising is important but until the wider issue of gender based violence and abuse is properly tackled, and the inequalities in society re women in positions of power, this issue won't go away.

While supporting this measure, there was also concern around this measure overly emphasising the negative aspects of political life.

Yes, there's never any reason not to run awareness campaigns on matters like this. The value aspect should come across stronger than the negative aspects in the messaging, but the negative needs addressing too. Provide solutions and mitigation suggestions at every opportunity.

There were many suggestions around how this measure could best be implemented, as well as opinion on the direction discourse needs to take. We include a sample here.

- I don't think the general public has any idea how difficult it is to be a politician in Ireland and I think if they realised just how many hours are involved for so little in the way of financial reward they might think different about it way.
- This is an important measure. Political participation and public service is something that some women do not see they have a role in. They recognise there is a value in these processes, but not necessarily that they can be valued within them. People can see politics as something that other people do.
- The VPSJ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice ran a programme in Dublin City centre getting persons from different areas to register to vote to engage with politics and it was successful in getting people engaged. For those who are socially excluded politics is another exclusion. We need to include and support and educate children, parents, and all in the community. The CSPE programme in secondary school should be used in primary school. Online abuse as well should be taught at primary school with the parents involved.
- I agree, more awareness through education and training in second and third level.
- Important. I feel the opinion of "well they are a public representative" as a way of excusing abuse/criticism is very harmful.
- How to work the algorithms like we learnt in Digital Defence course. IE don't scroll past abusive messaging, amplify the original message³.
- Existing politicians in Local Authorities and the Dáil need education and training. Unconscious Bias would be a good place to start. Also, in schools where boys must learn to regard women and girls as equally entitled to senior positions. It is so important for girls to see women in politics and senior positions. Online abuse is normal now - it needs to be called out and 'unnormalised'. Bystander awareness is powerful - train/show people how to act in the Bystander role, often people don't know how to intervene safely. Role Play training is very effective.
- Raising awareness, yes, and the need to discuss matters in a civil manner is important, but I would not like to stifle debate and shut down people voicing concerns or an alternative point of view.
- I think awareness raising needs to be done from secondary school up. The Digital Sphere has allowed for increases in trolling. Abusers can hide behind false accounts and cause detrimental damage to their victim.
- Training & Education and constant communication are important tools in getting the message across.
- Educating communities that freedom of speech is part of our Constitution but not if it impacts negatively on the person in the form of harassment in a personal space or home or place of work. Opinions count but constructively.
- More awareness campaign in these regards to be encouraged and sponsored.

³ This is a reference to See Her Elected training which covered how not to amplify the perpetrator while still offering support to the victim.

15% of respondents disagreed with this measure on raising awareness as presented. It was described as 'meaningless' and 'a long-term solution without impact on women running today'. There was a fear that it would 'only encourage more to do it if they realised it was going on'. There was concern about free speech:

Raising awareness, yes, and the need to discuss matters in a civil manner is important, but I would not like to stifle debate and shut down people voicing concerns or an alternative point of view.

The motives of perpetrators was mentioned as something this measure would do little to alleviate.

I think much of the abuse is orchestrated by individuals or organisations seeking to destabilize Irish society and prevent equitable democratic political participation.

The focus of awareness raising was questioned.

I think more specified awareness campaigns need to be done. The people who abuse/harass do so because they don't identify themselves as abusers.

And:

I don't think that a lack of education is the driving force for most - deterrents are needed. Also an independent support service (phone line and follow up advice session) like the one that operates for civil/public servants could be a support.

What is your opinion on Measure 2: Public Policy

including legislation, to safeguard and support those in political life.

There was almost unanimous support for public policy and legislation, with some qualifications over application and costs. 95% were in agreement with this measure.

One dissenting opinion was that this was 'Very tricky as it's a fine line between safeguarding political figures and criminalising opposition'. Another offered that 'This measure although in theory excellent will not assist as there is always the necessity to go through a judicial / litigation process which is costly.'

While agreeing with the importance of this measure, qualified support was voiced by some respondents. Observations included drawing attention to concerns over the cost to an individual of pursuing a legal remedy meaning it 'may not be accessible to all.' There was a request that this be extended to 'volunteers within communities', whose advocacy for their communities can also be considered as placing them in political life. Another requested that 'Any response here should be victim led'.

The difficulties of a culture change were recognised as well as the danger of a silo approach, i.e. looking at different measures in isolation:

Public policy around all aspects of political life is v. important and worthwhile. We need to make politics family-friendly by having proper working hours, work/life balance, childcare facilities for all working parents etc as well as legislation that's strictly around safety issues. Again, this is a wider societal issue.

Enforcement was not accepted as straightforward by a number of respondents, with observations including 'Legislation is only words unless it is enforced and respected.' And 'Guards need to investigate, DPP need to prosecute and Judges need to sentence properly. Until this happens legislation cant be well utilised.' Additionally,

Policy is only as good as enforcement. People who abuse those in political life in my experience don't care about societal pressures to treat people well. So whatever is proposed can't have no legs to stand on. Also a definition of political life needs clarifying and agreeing on.

Overall, legislation was seen as 'essential' and 'vital' and was accepted as central to encouraging women into politics. Suggestions in relation to this measure included:

- Agree there is more that can be done here. For example the candidate's address on the ballot paper. In a world where we are constantly advised not to share our personal information publicly, why then does the ballot paper need to have our home address? In no other job are you expected to have your customers / colleagues etc know your exact home address without there being a specific need for that information.

- This is needed and I would press for the inclusion of a person's political beliefs to be included as one of the grounds that a person cannot be discriminated against in our current Discrimination Act.
- This is essential. We can encourage from the bottom up but 'Hate Crime' legislation must be enacted. Abuse must be stopped and Bystanders must be supported too.
- This should definitely be implemented for current members and encourage future participation of talented individuals.
- I think this is absolutely necessary to protect women running for office. If they are abused because of it, the abuser needs to know that there are consequences.
- I feel the same laws that protect citizens should be suitable to cover politicians. I think equal protection.
- Public policy or legislation good as a preventive measure to violent acts.
- Legislation is a good deterrent.
- I think this would be very much welcomed as I believe it's only in the last few years the importance of public policy to protect political figures has shown it's important and it's obviously very much needed!
- Many women are unaware of legislation that provides protection and support in political life. The political arena has traditionally been seen as a man's world, and women are often discouraged from taking part or holding higher positions. It is important to promote gender equality and encourage women to pursue political careers.
- Setting up protests outside someone's house should be banned.

What is your opinion on Measure 3: Social Media Platforms

The response of social media platforms to address online abuse and harassment.

To begin, there was an acknowledgement of a positive aspect to social media:

Social media is a critical part of politics and in many senses politics and social media go hand in hand therefore these platforms, if monitored closely, would be a welcome addition to the online world.

However, the predominant response was robustly negative with much frustration expressed at social media platforms in relation to this measure. There was a strong sense that platforms are impervious to the consequences of what they allow. Platforms' current responses to online abuse and harassment was variously described as 'a joke', the 'wild west – little or no moderating' and that they simply 'do not care'.

Social media platforms were consistently identified as critical actors in enabling safe participation in public life, but scepticism was to the fore in opinions about their commitment to same. Nevertheless, respondents offered thoughtful and considered ideas on how the Task Force should proceed.

We believe the forceful response to this measure should be taken by the Task Force as a request by women preparing for local elections across Ireland to prioritise this measure in their work.

A summary of responses is below.

Social media platforms have a huge role to play in curbing abuse but are private companies and may not follow the spirit of the law and regulations

Glad to see this is being included.

Social media platforms are providing ways to report online abuse and harassment, however, their response needs to be improved. For example videos of people beating someone online should not be able to be shared thousands of times before its pulled.

More checks & balances on fake accounts should be in place.

The onus should be on social media platforms to moderate effectively, set algorithms to determine abuse and safe guard data of users. The user is their product so they should want to protect and ensure future viability. There is too much male bias at present or people who would never encounter the abuse so they don't understand the consequences

Yes these platforms must be accountable for removing any form of abuse and harassment, while holding the value of freedom of speech. Hate speech is real and often covered up by "the right to free speech".

The whole area of online abuse and harassment on social media for all users needs to be addressed much more proactively and effectively by all social media platforms.

Media platforms need to expedite any complaints and spot the posts before they are published. It should be more difficult for people to set up multiple accounts.

Can they be forced to stop allowing people to hide behind a cloak of anonymity?

Online media is the Wild West at the moment - there is little to no moderating.
This must change.

So far they have not done enough, if anything, to protect women. They need to be forced to protect women.

There must be consequences for abusers. Right now there is none. Only to accept that's apart of political life.

Social media needs to take measures that would stop abuse and harassment. I'm not saying ban but perhaps a period of severe policing by the channel.

All need reform & swiftly. All too powerful profitable & accountability minimal.

Completely inadequate. No real accountability or consequences.
Social media should enhance society

Why do they get away with allowing vile comments to remain

They do not care. They exist to make money, and money comes from engagement. They have bare minimum teams addressing this internally and some of them are traumatised by having to moderate the worst content. AI may help in time but then free speech law comes into it. Can we get the users of the platforms to switch to majority engagement with positive content? That would be a huge psychological shift and is the only real long term solution.

Social media thrives on controversy and stoking conflict is their stock and trade

Needs to be water tight, which it isn't now.

Digital information is required as women are more likely to dragged by social media for smaller things; e.g. - how they look, how they dressed, how they speak etc

They have the power but I have no faith in them using it unless legally obliged to.

The companies are not interested in protecting users they want revenue and profits. The State needs to protect the public from corporations and require them to act in line with Irish law to protect members of the public.

Social media companies must take responsibility for what is on their platforms

There is none, I have reported numerous times and never had a reasonable response

*They all need to do way more.
Reporting is a joke.*

They should be supportive of public representatives, or anyone willing to join.

What is your opinion on Measure 4: Oireachtas and Political Parties

The response of the Houses of the Oireachtas and Political Parties in demonstrating leadership in promoting civil discourse in public life.

Two dominant themes emerged in responses to this proposed measure. Reflecting the rural emphasis within SHE, participants were uncertain that any exercise taking place within the setting of the Oireachtas would have the required impact at county council level. In addition, critique was levied at a perceived current lack of civil discourse in national politics.

Some participants believed that political parties 'are making efforts to respond', and there was recognition that this measure would 'show support across the board and if a united front is found, promoting civil discourse in public life will be highlighted across many channels'. Another participant supported this measure as positive as it shows willingness to 'stand up and protect representatives and candidates'.

On the other hand, commentary also demonstrated a feeling that this is 'mere lip service', including observations such as:

- From seeing past promises being made and no progress on it I have little confidence in the response, and
- Civil discourse is important but totally insufficient in fighting the abuse of women politicians. It should be part of actual measures, such as laws, that protect women.

Doubt was cast on the effectiveness of an Oireachtas led measure promoting civil discourse for women in local politics. Comments indicative of those speaking to this theme include:

Important but I think it would be more important to start at a local level. Down the country there is a perception that national politicians are 'up in Dublin' and not really as tuned into rural life as much as councillors are.

And:

Viewed as an elite and having much greater protection than most county councillors. Not sure their response carried much weight.

For women in local politics, the opinion expressed was that political parties would have a larger role in leadership [on this measure] than the Oireachtas.

There was a strong call for the Houses of the Oireachtas to lead by example. A sample of opinions follows.

All politicians need training in unconscious bias and respectful debate. It is quite appalling to see the way women are treated in the Dáil during debates.

*Stop engaging in school yard tactics
themselves and lead by example*

Too many 'old codgers' who don't understand power & impact of social media. They are too busy shouting down the opposition and attempting to hold their own positions to worry or care

Room for improvement...

I think there are a lot of areas and a lot of minorities that need much more protection and that the Oireachtas, Political Parties, TDs, Senators and Cllrs need to speak up in support of on a much more regular and louder basis. The Traveller community experiences a huge amount of racism and discrimination which in some circles appears to be considered 'acceptable'. Much more could be done to support and protect this minority group in Irish society. Transphobic rhetoric and ideas have also become much more mainstream in recent years due to high profile transphobes and social media. More politicians need to be speaking out in support of the Trans community.

They must lead the way if anything is to happen nationally

Yes both the Houses of the Oireachtas and Parties have a responsibility to demonstrate and promote civil discourse. I think poor communication leads to misinformation, fear and endless blame.

Important but should be extended to large lobbying bodies – think of the ridiculous carry on which was not kept in check at Ballinasloe farming interest meeting this month. Totally unacceptable.

It seems to me that the Dail is not set up to promote civil discourse - committees seem much more effective and (slightly) less prone to grandstanding

Important to lead by example in discourse and on social media. Should be held accountable to factual accuracy.

There is often little or no respect in the debates in the Dáil. We need good examples of active participation that is not abusive.

Further Suggestions for Task Force

We concluded our survey by asking participants to add what measure(s) they would like the Task Force to consider.

We present their contributions directly, without amendment, analysis or commentary, for your consideration.

- I would like to suggest that the task force takes an active approach by assigning teams to each county. These teams can meet with women who are leading various groups and working towards bettering society. The goal would be to educate, train, and empower these women to further strengthen their impact.
- Stronger action regarding hate speech and bullying
- I would like to see an allowance for county councillors to have home security systems and access to an expert for immediate advice when something goes wrong.
- Advertising campaign on the role of local councillors, how much they put into it, they eat and sleep politics and their roles and it's terrible the abuse and harassment they get in return.
- Ombudsman for support, a dedicated helpline, whistleblowing/protected disclosures policy
- More examples of 'if you do xx this is the consequence'.
- The task is already monumental enough, best of luck!
- I think the Task Force should be looking at engaging TD's to be part of a community programme and they could invite schools to take part. Many school visit Dáil Eireann every year and they travel from Mayo and Galway. If the children could do a programme or webinars as part of a visit it would be good. And not too expensive recorded webinars and quizzes.
- Practical measures like not having to put your exact address on the ballot paper as a candidate. Local Authorities helping to provide meeting spaces for Cllrs and public representatives to hold constituency clinics in safe and public environments.
- Encouraging media (other than social media) to promote respectful discourse, including interviews which give opportunity for non confrontational engagement. Political parties should have a zero tolerance approach to disrespectful communication within the party.
- People's frustrations are at the heart of a lot of the abuse. I would like to see the correlation between the ever decreasing powers of councillors (given over to council mgt and private entities) and the levels of abuse. While councillors' functions are continually eroded they will continue to be seen as easy and weak targets.
- Abuse and seeking justice for same is very difficult to attain due to the costs that are incurred by the victim to seek legal representation / advice
- We could all benefit from embracing our vulnerabilities in safe spaces.
- More women need to be elected and more people of colour. To encourage this they need extra support and backing from political parties. Laws are needed to prevent racist and sexist language on social media platforms and on the street. Addresses of candidates should not be on the ballot paper, this is now a security issue.
- To ensure that those in Training for Public Office are also protected as its not much use for women to have to suffer until they are burnt out and finally get to office or quit. Most Women involved have families who will also be affected by the situation.

This would deter mums from becoming active as the wellbeing and safety of family is priority. The publishing of addresses should also be banned-GDPR and Privacy. Special face activated monitored phones and devices and email addresses should be issued. Surveillance door bells and cameras should be installed or be able to be claimed for as an incentive. The devices could have special app on them with an alarm and panic button style. The app could send help signal to local Garda station depending on location. The CCTV cameras in the area could then be checked in real time and the culprits reprimanded. You need proof and facts as the Gardai will not be able to bring case to DPP for prosecution without evidence and data. To say someone threatened you or is outside your home needs to be backed up as seeing it by yourself or feeling you are being watched would be viewed as hearsay (Judge Judy). Same with online threats they need strong evidence and neither a person or the Gardai are resourced to deal with it. In short Investment in security and attitude change need to be on the Agenda.

- I would definitely like to see laws that punish perpetrators of abuse whereby the threat of violence should be sufficient to go after them. I also think we need laws that force social media companies to protect women running for office from abuse.
- Better ways to track trolls.
- Some central contact for when forms of abuse do happen, how to handle them etc.
- There is little deterrent for people to be civil online or personally where no one else is listening
- I would like to elaborate on the 1st measurement- I think education is crucial but education in Secondary schools would make a massive difference and would hopefully help to break the curve through education.
- I think other groups in society outside of politics need to be seen to help change this narrative- media being the main one.
- Supports for all those in public life to claim protection as an expense against income, for parties and organisations to be able to use funding for protection. Both for physical protection such as a driver for candidates, as well as cyber-security expertise.
- Huge fines to Meta, Instagram, Tiktok, FB radio, Media, journalists whoever is responsible for abusing another person.
- Defamation is difficult to prove & only worth pursuing through the courts when the defendant has funds, even then no compulsion to pay.
- Govt needs to be more proactive, too many tribunals & no results or change from same.
- Educate school goes from 8 years onwards. Our education system changing but too slowly. Too much anxiety/ social isolation/ stress/ bullying which leads to social psychiatric & ethnic problems. Social media appears to fuel it. More tighter regulations needed. Sex trade & drug related criminality fuel a lot of these issues. More Gardai (better pay & conditions/ retention & recruitment a serious problem).
- Protesters acting illegally should be arrested and charged. Peaceful protest is fine but there are limits to what behaviour should be tolerated. Education can help around what is acceptable. However, all political actors should be expected to behave within certain limits in a peaceful democracy.

Appendix 1

Personal email from Dr Michelle Maher, Programme Manager See Her Elected, 25th July 2023.

Good afternoon,

See Her Elected have been asked to make a submission to a Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life. I have included a link at the bottom where you can read about their terms of reference. They want to examine how to safeguard and encourage women and minority group's participation in political life in the face of reports of abuse and harassment experienced by politicians which disproportionately impacts women.

We think it is vitally important that your voice is heard by the Task Force. You are women who are either already planning to be in county councils next year, seriously thinking about it, and/or are planning to help a woman in your area to be elected to a county council. Many of you are active in your communities, which can also be considered political life.

I have put together a short anonymous survey and here is the link [link provided].

I would be grateful if you could have a look, have a think, and respond before the end of next week – 4th August. I appreciate it is holiday time for a lot of people so thank you in advance for your time on this.

The nature of the Task Force's business means the survey asks about abuse. Please do not continue if the topic is uncomfortable or upsetting for you. Feel free to give me a call if you need to.

Kind regards,
Michelle

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Task Force on Safe Participation in Public Life



This form asks you about abuse. Please do not continue if the subject matter is in any way upsetting for you.

We are using the current HSE definitions. **Physical abuse** is the use of physical force, the threat of physical force, or mistreatment of one person by another which may cause or result in actual physical harm or injury. **Sexual abuse** is any behaviour (physical, psychological, verbal, virtual/online) perceived to be of a sexual nature that is controlling, exploitative, harmful, or unwanted towards another person. Abuse which may be termed **emotional, psychological, bullying or harassment** is behaviour that is psychologically harmful to another person and which inflicts anxiety or mental distress by threat, humiliation, or other verbal/non-verbal conduct.

What county do you live in? *

Short answer text

Which best describes you



Checkboxes

- I plan to run in the 2024 local elections ✕
- I am thinking about running in the 2024 local elections ✕
- I will or would like to join a campaign team to help a woman get elected in 2024 ✕
- I am involved in SHE with an eye on future local elections ✕
- I am involved with SHE to learn about politics and how elections work ✕
- None of the above! ✕

Experience



This section asks about experiences of abuse or harassment. Please do not continue if in doing so is in any way upsetting for you. If you do not wish to answer, you can skip to the next section. Here are the definitions for you again:

Physical abuse is the use of physical force, the threat of physical force, or mistreatment of one person by another which may cause or result in actual physical harm or injury.

Sexual abuse is any behaviour (physical, psychological, verbal, virtual/online) perceived to be of a sexual nature that is controlling, exploitative, harmful, or unwanted towards another person.

Abuse which may be termed **emotional, psychological, bullying or harassment** is behaviour that is psychologically harmful to another person and which inflicts anxiety or mental distress by threat, humiliation, or other verbal/non-verbal conduct.

Have you experienced any form of abuse as a result of your current participation in political life (whether as a potential candidate or as a woman active in your community or around a particular issue).

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

If answering yes, can you please briefly describe what happened (i.e. in what form and in what setting).

Long answer text

Mitigation Measures



The Task Force wish to understand what measures might alleviate concerns around safety for women in political life. They have suggested **four measures** in their terms of reference. We have listed these and invite you to comment. There is room at the end for you to add your own ideas.

What is your opinion on measure 1: Raising awareness, including through education and training, of the value of political participation and public service and of the detrimental impact of abuse, including online abuse, and harassment in deterring political participation across Irish society.

Long answer text

What is your opinion on measure 2: Public policy, including legislation, to safeguard and support those in political life.

Long answer text



What is your opinion on measure 3: The response of social media platforms to address online abuse and harassment.

Long answer text

What is your opinion on measure 4: The response of the Houses of the Oireachtas and Political Parties in demonstrating leadership in promoting civil discourse in public life.

Long answer text

Please feel free to add what measure(s) YOU would like to see the Task Force consider.

Long answer text



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