

Introduction

Women's political participation has increased globally in recent years, but research has demonstrated that women in politics face disproportionate levels of violence and harassment, including physical and online violence. These experiences tend to vary by race, with women of color facing distinct and often heightened forms of gendered and racialized violence.

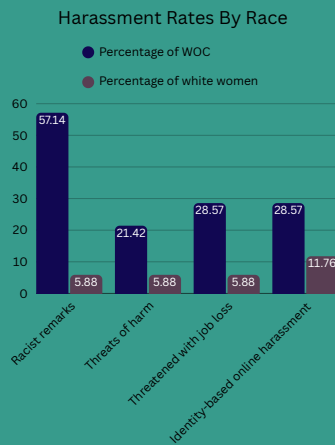
Within the growing research on violence against women in politics, scholarship has largely focused on national and high-profile political figures, leaving the experiences of women serving in local government unrepresented. Local women politicians may face particular vulnerabilities because they are highly accessible to constituents while lacking the security protections available to higher-level officials.

This study examines how the forms, frequency, and perceived severity of violence and harassment differ between women city councilors of color and white women city councilors in the New Jersey. By applying an intersectional lens to local political violence, this exploratory research aims to address gaps in understanding how gender and race shape women's experiences in local office.

29.4% of participants have been the subject of sexual or sexist remarks.

29% of participants have faced violence or harassment based on their stance on a policy or potential vote.

37.5% of participants have been frightened as a result of violence or harassment.



Findings

The women local councilors in this study reported high rates of violence and harassment, with women of color reporting markedly higher levels of numerous types of harassment.

Interview data illuminated the high level of vulnerability felt by the local councilors, the perceived added layer of gender-based intimidation, and hesitance to continue a career in politics as a result of harassment.

Key Findings:

- 57.1% of the women of color participants reported being the subject of racist remarks in the course of their election or time in office.
- 25% of participants were the victim of online humiliation.
- 35.3% of white participants and 42.9% of women of color participants have been frightened as a result of harassment.
- 21.4% of women of color participants have received threats of harm.
- Participants felt they were highly accessible to harassment and violence as a result of living and working in the communities they serve.

Conclusion

These exploratory findings suggest that violence against women in politics is shaped not only by race and gender, but also by level of office. Local officials' proximity to constituents can collapse the boundary between public service and private life, while women of color may experience additional racialized forms of harassment. These findings point to the need for larger studies that examine race, gender, and political office simultaneously.

Research Question

How do the forms, frequency, and perceived severity of violence and harassment differ between women of color local councilors and white women local councilors?

Methodology

Study Population and Sampling

- Examined women serving in local government across six counties in New Jersey: Camden, Cumberland, Essex, Mercer, Middlesex, and Union
- Outreach to 275 women politicians based on geographic and demographic criteria
- 35 respondents (12.7% response rate), with 17 white women, 14 women of color, and 4 respondents who did not specify their racial identity

Survey

- Administered a Qualtrics survey measuring multiple forms of violence and harassment, including sexist and racist remarks, physical intimidation, and online harassment
- Respondents identified the perpetrator and their relationships where applicable
- Survey responses were used in calculations of differences in violence between white women and women of color
- Nine respondents participated in follow-up interviews conducted via Zoom

"There's a lot of nastiness on social media and towards men and women, but I feel like there is a willingness to go for the jugular with women. There's somehow the perception that they're either more vulnerable or they won't fight back or they shouldn't fight back."

"One aspect that I think does not get focused on enough is that, at the local level, you're dealing with these people directly. You go to the store, and when people are upset at you, you get it directly. Your kids get it. Your spouse gets it."

"There is a significant intimidating factor there because there's no buffer at all. Everyone knows where you live, and they will come and ring the doorbell or put stuff in your mailbox... There is no buffer."

"As a mother and as a wife, I've been very hesitant to continue a career in politics outside of the local level, because that brings another layer of concern and threat that I'm definitely not prepared for. I would assume my family wouldn't be prepared either."

"You just learn to live with it, but it takes a toll."

Acknowledgements

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