



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
Center for Research & Fellowships

Intersectional Analysis of Violence Against Women in Local Elected Office

Isabella White and Shiza Saad

Laidlaw Scholars Program

Dr. Nadia E. Brown

August 14, 2026

Introduction

Women's representation in politics has steadily increased in recent decades, and female politicians have made their mark on democratic politics globally. Unfortunately, the women making these political advances are often subjected to violence, both online and in-person. Minority women leaders have been victimized at particularly high levels, reflecting the compounded oppression on individuals occupying multiple marginalized identities. Although awareness is growing about the concern of political violence, current US-based scholarship on the issue remains concentrated on women in high level national offices, leaving a knowledge gap in the experiences of women politicians working at the local level.

This research project analyzes violence experienced by local women politicians in the US through an intersectional lens. With this study, we hope to provide insight into the experiences of local women politicians and begin to trace the potential nuances of the experiences of women of color. We pose this 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? In response, we argue that there are high levels of harassment against all women in local offices, with particularly high levels of and notable differences in the forms of harassment against women of color city councilors due to systematic racism and sexism.

Data and Methods

Violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is at the core of this study. The United Nations Women & United Nations Development Programme (2017) defines VAWIP as, "Any act of, or threat of, gender-based violence, resulting in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women, that prevents them from exercising and realising their political rights,

whether in public or private spaces, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and to freely campaign, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy freedom of opinion and expression.”

This study examines local political offices in New Jersey, which refer to the elected municipal positions, such as councilwomen, mayors, and committeewomen for localized jurisdictions including townships, cities, and boroughs. For the purposes of this study, white women are defined as adult females identified as belonging to the Caucasian race or of European descent. Women of color (WOC) can be defined as a diverse coalition of women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Black women/African Americans, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, Indigenous peoples, and Hispanic women/Latinas. Intersectionality is a term used to describe the oppression that members of multiple marginalized groups have faced historically to maintain the dormant social hierarchy that favors white males (Crenshaw, 1989).

We argue that the heightened levels of VAWIP against WOC is due to racism and sexism—two key phenomena integral to understanding the experiences of WOC. Haeny et al. (2021) define racism as “a system of beliefs (racial prejudices), practices (racial discrimination), and policies based on race that operate to advantage those with historical power, White people in the United States of America (USA) and most other Western nations.” The Council of Europe (2019) defined sexism as “Any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice, or behaviour based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline.” In the case of WOC city councilors in New Jersey, racism and sexism are compounded to create and impact their distinct political experiences. The grant that funded this research project was specific to

New Jersey, which was an appropriate case study because of its racial diversity (Black, Latino and Asian) and prominent presence of women in elected office.

The total number of women in local positions in New Jersey is around one thousand, which was too many to contact for the purposes of this study. The demographics of the counties were examined, and based on this, six that had high levels of diversity in terms of racial composition were chosen for research. The contact information for the 275 women serving in these counties was obtained using internet searches. A total of 275 women local politicians were contacted via email across six New Jersey counties: Camden, Cumberland, Essex, Mercer, Middlesex, and Union. 35 women responded, yielding a response rate of 12.7%. The following is a breakdown of the ethnic identities of the respondents:

Identity	Number of respondents (x)
Asian American/Pacific Islander	2
Black/African American	6
Latino/Latina/Latinx	5
Native American	0
White	17
Other	1
Did not specify	4

To gather data for this study, we requested that women city councilors in New Jersey respond to a short survey that asked whether they had experienced various forms of harassment during their time in office. The survey, which was sent out via Qualtrics, prefaced the questions with a short explanation of why the respondents' contributions were important by stating, "Local elected officials find themselves at a crossroads, where they are seen as viable and important

candidates and elected officials, and where the harassment and violence/abuse you suffer has gained national attention. The purpose of the Violence Against NJ Women in Office project is to document this rise in violence, and examine how these experiences influence candidacies, representation and political ambition.”

The questions spanned types of harassment and violence, including sexist and racist remarks, the spread of disinformation through writing or images, and physical violence. The city councilors were asked to indicate the perpetrators of the harassment and their relationship to them (for example, if the perpetrators shared their political, racial, and gender identity). The survey was not open-ended, but the respondents had the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences if they consented to being contacted for an interview via Zoom. The survey provided the data that was used to calculate the prevalence of violence experienced by the women and the differences of the prevalence of each kind of attack between white women and women of color.

The statistical significance of the difference between the white women’s responses and the WOC’s responses was determined through t-tests. Nine women agreed to follow-up interviews, which were conducted via Zoom.

Findings

Considering the small sample size of the study—35 respondents—it is important to note its exploratory nature. Our results yielded no statistical significance, as measured by t-tests, with the exception of one survey question. As Figure 1 shows, our survey data reveal that 29.41% of all respondents have been the subject of sexual or sexist remarks. More of the WOC (35.71%) dealt with such remarks, as compared to 23.53% of white respondents; the difference, however, was not statistically significant. The starkest difference between the two groups was exhibited in the response to the question regarding racist remarks, and this comparison yielded the *only*

statistically significant t-test value. 29.41% of all survey respondents have been the subject of racist remarks, but only 5.88% of white survey respondents experienced this, while a staggering 57.14% of WOC survey respondents were subject to racist remarks.

The survey also inquired about harassment the women experienced online. 25% of respondents had been aware of humiliating pictures of them or comments about them being posted publicly. 23.53% and 23.08% of the white women and the WOC, respectively, experienced this, indicating that very similar proportions of both groups were subjected to online harassment. In the case of traditional media or social media publishing pictures or comments about them that were highly disparaging based on their identity, however, 28.57% of the WOC respondents had such experiences whilst only 11.76% of the white respondents did, showcasing that identity-based online attacks were more prevalent among the group of WOC politicians.

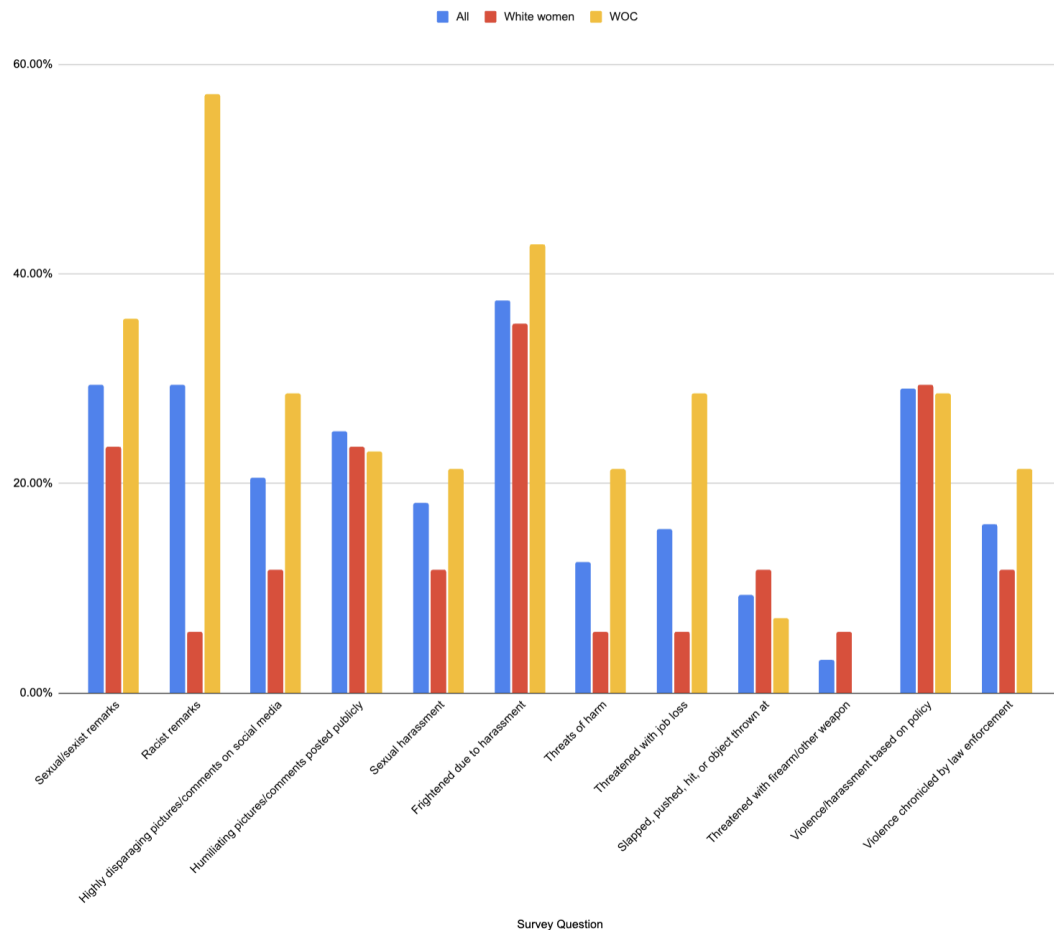
18.18% of the participants were victims of sexual harassment, with 11.76% of the white women and 21.42% of the WOC reporting such incidents. A high proportion of the respondents (37.50%) felt frightened as a result of harassment—35.29% of the white and 42.86% of the WOC respondents disclosed such feelings.

Two other survey questions yielded responses that differed among the two groups. 12.5% of the women received threats of harm to them and/or those close to them—5.88% of the white respondents and 21.42% of the WOC. 15.63% of the participants have been threatened with losing their job or having their professional development blocked; 5.88% of the white respondents and 28.57% of the WOC relayed such episodes. Both these questions were related to the receipt of threats, and though the differences in the two groups were not statistically significant, the experiences were more common among the group of WOC politicians.

On the other hand, one question that yielded very similar answers from both groups was if the women had faced violence and/or harassment based on their stance on a policy or potential vote. 29.03% of the women responded yes, with 29.41% of the white respondents and 28.57% of the WOC facing such harassment, indicating that when their policies are the reason behind harassment, both groups within this sample experience it equally.

9.34% of the women have been slapped, pushed, hit, or had something thrown at them. This was experienced by a greater proportion of the white women (11.76%) than the WOC (7.14%) in this sample. Similarly, 3.13% of the survey respondents have been threatened with a firearm or other weapon. 5.88% of the white women reported this, while none of the WOC did. However, when considering how many of the women had violence against them chronicled by law enforcement, 16.13% of the total said yes, but more of the WOC (21.42%) did, in comparison to the 11.76% of the white women.

Figure 1: Survey question responses among all participants, White women, and WOC



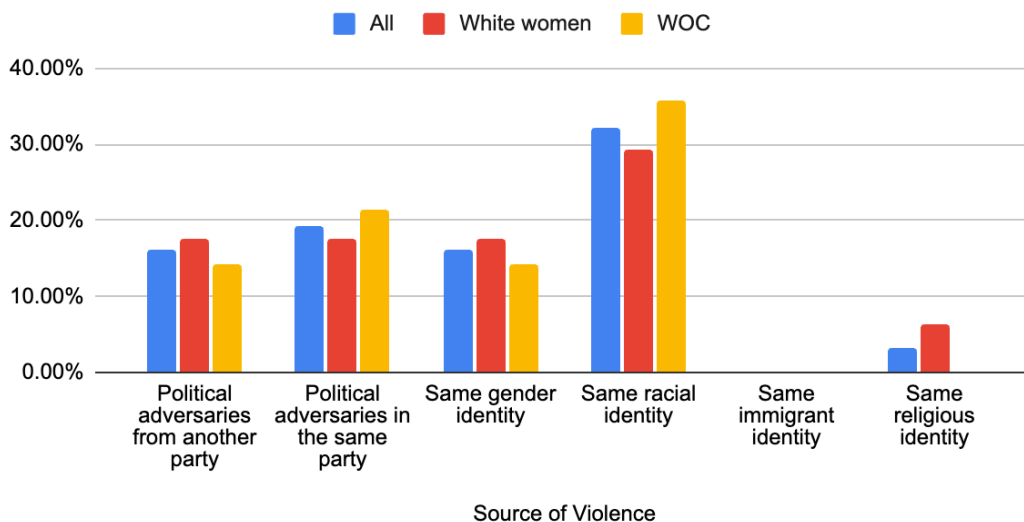
Sources of Violence

The survey included questions about who perpetrated the violence and harassment against the respondents. Figure 2 shows the differences in percentages of the sources of violence that were experienced by respondents based on their race. As the figure indicates, the most prevalent source of violence was individuals who shared the victims' racial identity, as experienced by 32.36% of all participants, 29.41% of the white participants, and 35.71% of the women of color participants. Conversely, none of the participants experienced violence or

harassment from people who shared their immigrant identity. Few participants, only 3.33%, reported that people who shared their religious identity committed violence against them, with none of them being women of color. Only 6.25% of the white participants reported this experience.

16.13% of all participants, 17.65% of the white participants, and 14.29% of the women of color participants have faced violence and/or harassment from political adversaries from another party. Whereas 19.35% of all participants, 17.65% of the white participants, and 21.42% of the women of color participants have faced violence and/or harassment from political adversaries in the *same* party. 16.13% of participants have faced violence or harassment from individuals that share their gender identity, with 17.65% of the white participants and 14.29% of the women of color participants reporting this experience.

Figure 2: Percentages of different sources of violence experienced by participants



Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the experiences of violence and harassment of women serving at the local level of government. Although there is ample evidence of the prevalence of violence against women in politics, as outlined in the literature review and introduction, gaps remain in differentiating between the experiences of different groups of women. This research aims to begin the work of filling in the gaps in understanding surrounding the experiences of American women serving in local office, a position that we expected to yield unique results as a function of the high level of integration that city councilors have with their districts. We shaped the analysis around our central research question: How do the forms, frequency, and perceived severity of violence differ between white women and women of color serving in local offices?

Speaking broadly, women city councilors experience substantial harassment. Local women politicians experience sexualized harassment, threats, online abuse, physical violence, and professional retaliation; these findings demonstrate that violence against women in politics is not limited to highly visible national figures, who have been the focus of most studies in this area. Rather than the violence that national politicians may face as a result of broader attention and scrutiny, this research tells a story of local elected leaders facing violence and harassment specifically because of their smaller, community-oriented work.

Because city councilors live and work in the districts they serve, they have, as one city councilor put it, “no buffer” between their personal lives and their work in elected office. The vast majority of city councilors work traditional nine-to-five jobs in addition to their role in local politics, live in the neighborhoods in which they legislate, and interact with their constituents on both a personal and professional level every day. This opens up unique possibilities for harassment; for example, 28.6% of the women of color city councilors have been threatened with

losing their job or having their professional development blocked as a result of their role in local politics or their stance on certain policies. This suggests that local officials may be in a particularly precarious financial situation, as they need to maintain employment in their communities in order to remain economically afloat. In many cases, the pay for city councilor positions is a small stipend, if the role is not an entirely volunteer position, putting local women officials in a dangerous position of having to mitigate intimidation and harassment while needing to continue working a regular job in their communities. This particular example of harassment had a disproportionately higher impact on women of color in this study than on white women—only 5.88% of the white women politicians reported having experienced these employment threats. Although any amount of financial intimidation in local politics is dangerous to the democratic process and thus worthy of attention, it is particularly concerning that women of color seem to be targeted with this specific form of harassment. Further research on a larger scale is necessary to evaluate the extent to which this pattern persists on a broader scale.

Notably, even in non-race-related forms of harassment and violence, the women of color politicians in this survey tended to report higher levels of harassment. For example, the proportion of women of color who reported sexist remarks was 12.2 percentage points higher than that of white respondents. A 9.7-percentage-point gap separated women of color and white women who were victims of sexual harassment. 15.5% more of the women of color sample, proportionally, reported receiving threats of harm, and 22.7% more reported threats of job loss or having their professional development blocked. Although none of these forms of violence and harassment are explicitly race-related, the women of color were more likely to be targeted. This aligns with our expectations for the results, which used intersectionality theory to hypothesize that women of color would be more likely to be subjected to nearly all forms of violence and

harassment. These results, which demonstrate intersectional discrimination at the local level of government, mirror similar studies done at higher levels of state and federal government. As outlined in the literature review, women of color in office have been significantly more likely to face violence online and have been generally subjected to both sexist and racist remarks disparaging their multiple marginalized identities. The results from this study suggest that race and gender operate simultaneously, rather than as separate forms of discrimination.

However, an important nuance from these results is that women of color were not found to be more likely to experience every form of violence. For example, white women reported higher rates of physical assault and weapon threats in this sample—although these rates differ from those of the women of color by between approximately four to six percent, which is a small margin considering the limited size of this study. Several categories of harassment were approximately the same for both groups of women: policy-based harassment and online humiliation saw nearly identical results from both white women and women of color. Rather than arguing that women of color experience universally higher levels of victimization, these findings suggest that local elected officials are generally subject to high levels of harassment regardless of race, but that women of color appear to be particularly vulnerable due to their experiences of both race and sex-based discrimination.

Despite this pattern, however, more research is needed to determine the intensity of the potential disconnect between the experiences of white women in local offices and women of color in local offices. Though this study may form a foundation for examining violence and harassment against women in local politics, replication on a larger scale would illuminate the extent to which patterns in this data occur more broadly.

Beyond the sample size limitation of this study, the political demographic of New Jersey and its high level of diversity likely impacted the results. Further research is needed exploring how location and area type affect the harassment faced by local leaders. For example, New Jersey's high level of diversity and strong tendency towards progressive politics most likely result in different treatment of women of color politicians than, for example, a majority white, rural, or strongly conservative area. Also, religious discrimination was not a major source of harassment for the women surveyed in this study—a factor that may loom much larger in very Christian or conservative communities. It is necessary to conduct similar local-level research in demographically and politically distinct areas of the United States in order to better understand the broad patterns and differences in the experience of women elected to local office.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Colleen Daugherty and Professor Nadia Brown for their guidance and support on this project. Thank you also to the Laidlaw Foundation for making this research possible. Finally, we are incredibly grateful to all of the women politicians who spoke to us and shared their experiences.

Works Cited

- Bradshaw, S. (2024, November). *Disinformation and identity-based violence*. Stanley Center for Peace and Security.
<https://stanleycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Disinformation-and-Identity-Based-Violence-Bradshaw.pdf>
- Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers. (2019). *Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on preventing and combating sexism*.
https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=090000168093b26a
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), Article 8.
<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>

- Haeny, A. M., Holmes, S. C., & Williams, M. T. (2021). The need for shared nomenclature on racism and related terminology in psychology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(5), 886–892. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916211000760>
- Jankowicz, N., Hunchak, J., Pavliuc, A., Davies, C., Pierson, S., & Kaufmann, Z. (2021, January). *Malign creativity: How gender, sex, and lies are weaponized against women online*. Wilson Center and Moonshot CVE. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>
- Krook, M. L. (2017). Violence against women in politics. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(1), 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0007>.
- National Institutes of Health, Office of Extramural Research. (2025, January 20). *Definitions*. Grants & Funding. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://grants.nih.gov/policy-and-compliance/policy-topics/harassment/definitions>
- Nee, R. C. (2023). #JoeandtheHoe: Exploring Gender and Racial Stereotypes Used to Discredit Kamala Harris in the 2020 Presidential Election. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 34(3), 273–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2022.2160678>
- Gehrke, M. (2026). How are gender and race deployed in disinformation? An exploratory study of women politicians. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 35(3), 648–665. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2600383>
- Guerin, C., & Maharasingam-Shah, E. (2020). *Public figures, public rage: Candidate abuse on social media*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Public-Figures-Public-Rage-4.pdf>

- Hakansson, S., & Lajevardi, N. (2024). Representation at risk: Evaluating levels and consequences of violence against immigrant-background politicians. *American Political Science Review*, 119(3), 1463-1478. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s000305542400100x>
- Herrick, R., & Thomas, S. (2022). Not Just Sticks and Stones: Psychological Abuse and Physical Violence among U.S. State Senators. *Politics & Gender*, 18(2), 422–447.
doi:10.1017/S1743923X2000063X
- Herrick, R., & Thomas, S. (2023). An Intersectional Exploration of Psychological Violence, Threats, and Physical Violence of Mayors in 2021. *American Politics Research*, 52(3), 264–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x231220648>
- Herrick, R., & Thomas, S. (2024). The Effects of Violence against U.S. Officeholders. *Political Science Quarterly*, 139(3), 407–423. <https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqae011>
- Thakur, D., & Finkel, M. (2024). *Hated more: Online violence targeting women of color candidates in the 2024 U.S. election*. Center for Democracy & Technology & Ford Institute for Human Security, University of Pittsburgh.
<https://cdt.org/insights/report-hated-more-online-violence-targetingwomen-of-color-candidates-in-the-2024-us-election/>
- Thakur, D., & Hankerson Madrigal, D. L. (Eds.). (2022). *An unrepresentative democracy: How disinformation and online abuse hinder women of color political candidates in the United States*. Center for Democracy & Technology.
<https://cdt.org/insights/an-unrepresentative-democracy-how-disinformation-and-online-abuse-hinder-women-of-color-political-candidates-in-the-united-states/>
- UN Women. (2025, November 13). *FAQs: Digital abuse, trolling, stalking, and other forms of technology-facilitated violence against women and girls*.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/digital-abuse-trolling-stalking-and-other-forms-of-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women>

UN Women & UNDP. (2017). *Preventing violence against women in elections: A programming guide*.

<https://www.ec-undp-electoralassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/undp-contents-publications-preventing-violence-against-women.pdf>

Wood, R. M. (2024). The effects of electoral violence on women's legislative representation. *Political Research Quarterly*, 77(3), 915–930.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129241252373>