

#Metoo: Dragging dark acts into the light

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Opinion

In the corridors of power, abuse continues while prosecutions are conspicuously absent, writes Barbara Matera



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Since the #MeToo movement's inception in 2017, it has become clear that sexual advances, indecencies, harassment and assaults against women - as well as against men - can be found in many places.

One year on, we have seen women from across industries, cultures and nationalities come forward with their stories of sexual harassment and discrimination - including women in the highest positions of political power.

Many of these were members of parliaments within public institutions across Europe. Follow-up

campaigns, such as the Swedish #IMaktensKorridorer (“In the corridors of power”) have received widespread recognition and praise; this saw 1693 women in Swedish political life speak out against sexual harassment at work.

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The French Parliament has been rocked by several sexual harassment scandals. In May 2016, IMF leader Christine Lagarde was one of 17 current or former female ministers in the French government signing a declaration aimed at toughening existing sexual harassment laws.

A study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Assembly of the Council of Europe shows that acts of harassment, sexism and abuse are prevalent in European parliaments.

The survey is based on extensive interviews with 123 female European MPs and members of parliamentary staff. It reveals that more than 85 percent of female MPs had suffered psychological violence in the course of their term.

Furthermore, 47 percent had received death threats or threats of rape or assault, and a quarter of all respondents had suffered sexual violence. Alarmingly, the report showed that female MPs active in the fight against gender inequality and violence against women were among those singled out for attack.

This report is the first in a series of studies seeking to raise awareness and provide insight into violence against women in parliaments on a global scale. The findings are alarming and a cause for concern.

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The report also shows that few acts of sexism, harassment and violence are ever reported to the police, despite them being clear breaches of fundamental and political rights.

The consensus among the majority of respondents was that there was no mechanism within their parliament that they could turn to for help. There were also clear doubts over the effectiveness and fairness of existing procedures to combat the problem.

Since the inception of the #MeToo movement, some European parliaments have implemented changes. In the UK, a former High Court judge has been appointed by Parliament to investigate

allegations of harassment of House of Commons staff.

The judge aims to gain an understanding of the scope of the harassment allegations and see how existing procedures can be improved. Some parliaments, such as those in Austria and Switzerland, have set up independent systems to provide personalised and confidential counselling.

The Swedish and Finnish parliaments have made improvements to their complaints procedures, incorporating internal investigations.

While it can be argued that #MeToo and subsequent campaigns have highlighted the extent of sexualised violence and harassment and placed it onto national and European agendas, such acts still prosper in the corridors of power.

Their reach extends to digital spheres, where female politicians often face grave, and often sexualised, hate speech. Even in parliaments where they have gained quasi-equal representation, female MPs are targets of violence, harassment and systematic discrimination.

It is clear that European parliaments must urgently follow up on existing measures and implement new safety nets.

About the author

Barbara Matera (IT, EPP) is a vice-chair of Parliament's women's rights and gender equality committee

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