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Présidence de Malte
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Annual Conference of the Gender Equality Commission

“Tackling sexism and violence against women: an essential step towards equal participation”

17-18 September 2025

Concept note

Women's participation in politics has significantly increased over recent decades, with many countries introducing gender quotas, anti-discrimination laws, and policies aimed at protecting women's rights. Despite these advances, women's underrepresentation in politics remains a systemic issue and barriers to their full participation in political life are still significant. One of the most persistent obstacles growing at an alarming rate is the onslaught of sexism as well as violence against women in politics. These both deter women from entering or remaining in politics and form a daunting barrier to achieving gender equality in political decision-making. Political activities and public decision-making remain male-dominated, with historic patriarchal structures continuing to reinforce inequalities. By and large, it is still men who set political priorities, and political culture is often structured around gendered patterns that maintain structural barriers for women's meaningful engagement. The rise of populist movements, anti-rights agendas, and the backlash against gender equality and women's rights have compounded these challenges. At the same time, new and emerging threats, including technology-facilitated violence, are deepening existing inequalities and silencing women, including in political spaces and public debates, further weakening democratic discourse and inclusive governance.

Such threats directly undermine women's ability to participate equally, freely, and without fear in political life, as emphasised in the Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029 (“the Strategy”), which underscores the need to tackle sexism and discrimination, including sexist hate speech, in the political sphere. The underrepresentation of women in political and public life is certainly a matter of human rights and gender justice, but it is also a fundamental challenge to democracy itself. The Strategy makes it clear: the equal participation of women and men in the political and public spheres is essential for well-functioning democracies.

The 2025 Annual Conference of the Gender Equality Commission will address the pressing issue of violence and sexism against women in politics, with a specific focus on combating such challenges within political parties and institutions. The conference aligns with the objectives of the Strategy and with the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, which call for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and the promotion of equal political participation. To this end, it will bring together high-level decision makers and policy makers from Council of Europe member states, observers and non-member states; members of the Gender Equality Commission; representatives of relevant Council of Europe institutions and bodies; youth representatives; independent experts on ensuring equal political participation; representatives of regional and international organisations, of parliaments, civil society representatives, including representatives of women's rights organisations; academics; and media representatives.

The 2025 Annual Conference will focus on the following areas:

- **Breaking down the barriers to equal and meaningful participation: ending sexism and violence, including technology-facilitated violence, in political life**

Women in politics continue to face widespread sexism and violence, both online and offline, which undermines their continuous political engagement and leadership. These forms of violence, ranging from harassment and intimidation to sexual violence, persist within political parties, institutions, and public debates, creating a hostile environment that discourages women from fully participating in democratic life. As digital platforms become central to political engagement, technology-facilitated violence against women in politics has further exacerbated these challenges, with targeted disinformation campaigns, deepfake threats, and AI-driven harassment disproportionately silencing women leaders and candidates. This phenomenon is exacerbated for women from discriminated groups. Addressing these threats requires not only stronger legal and institutional protections but also a concerted effort to make political spaces safer, both online and offline. The work of the GEC on gender equality and AI and on accountability for technology-facilitated violence will be instrumental in shaping comprehensive policy solutions to these challenges.

A first panel discussion will explore the various forms of sexism and violence faced by women in political spaces, from harassment and intimidation to sexual violence within political parties, institutions, and public life. It will examine how technology-facilitated violence against women, including online sexism and hate speech, disproportionately target women leaders and candidates, silencing them and undermining democratic debate. The discussion will also explore strategies to counter these threats, including legal and regulatory measures, on-line content moderation and policy interventions to ensure safer digital spaces for women in politics.

A second panel discussion will examine how these acts of violence function as a deterrent to women's political engagement and reinforce structural gender inequalities. The discussion will highlight the role of political parties and institutions in preventing and addressing sexism and violence, discuss good practices, and underline the urgent need for stronger accountability mechanisms.

- **The future of women in politics: confronting the anti-feminist backlash and advancing gender equality**

The rise of anti-rights movements and anti-gender rhetoric has contributed to a shrinking space for women's leadership and political engagement, threatening democratic progress and reinforcing structural inequalities. The backlash against gender equality and women's rights, including restrictive policies and narratives, is undermining women's rights, limiting their access to decision-making roles. At the same time, longstanding structural barriers, such as electoral systems, unequal access to resources and discriminatory practices, continue to hinder women's participation in political life.

The first part of the session will consist of a 'fireside chat' between a high-level woman politician and a woman activist or journalist involved in politics. The conversation will explore the lived experiences of women in politics, and the impact on sexism and violence on women's leadership and participation in political life as well as on their private lives. The discussion will also explore how disinformation about gender equality and technology-facilitated violence against women influence women's political engagement and what different actors (governments, institutions, and civil society) can do to protect and promote women's political participation.

The second part of the session will consist of a panel discussion that will explore how the backlash against women's rights is affecting policies and action to address the structural inequalities and in what way gendered political expectations continue to limit women's access to decision-making roles and political spaces. The discussion will highlight concrete solutions, including legal frameworks and institutional reforms such as adapted parity laws and gender quotas, and good practices to advance gender equality in politics and ensure a truly inclusive and democratic future.