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'More Visible and Vulnerable to Attacks' – Violence Against (local) Women Politicians and the Local Costs of Doing Politics

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from a wider feminist institutionalist analysis of Welsh local government and women local councilors' experiences, exploring specifically violence against women politicians and the subsequent local "costs of doing politics" for women. Drawing on data from 18 semi-structured interviews with women councilors during the 2017–2022 electoral period, first-hand accounts are explored. Incidences including acts of violence, abuse, and harassment committed by the public in public and offline, and by peers in the council chamber were discussed by participants, alongside feelings of being "at-risk." Violence acts as a form of resistance to women's electoral presence and is found to have a significant impact on women's political representation. It affects descriptive representation, through discouraging prospective councilors and causing interviewees to question continuing in politics, and substantive representation by permeating political cultures, and silencing women's voices by forcing them to change the way they "do politics."

KEYWORDS

Violence against women politicians; political representation; politics and gender; local government; UK politics

Introduction

Violence against women in politics (henceforth VAWP) has become a significant subfield within politics and gender studies. Whilst research on the topic has been slowly growing for decades, including notable contributions from scholars in Latin America, outside of academic spheres the abuse of women politicians became a globally salient public issue following "flash-points" and serious incidents in various countries (Collier and Raney 2019; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016; Krook 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020; O'Connell and Ramshaw 2018). In the United Kingdom (UK), where this study took place, it was the 2016 murder of serving Member of Parliament (MP) Jo Cox during a routine constituency surgery in Birstall which acted as an unfortunate catalyst for serious discussions about VAWP in Westminster and beyond. Countless UK women politicians have since cited their experiences of VAWP as key motivations for standing down and escaping political life. This suggests an impact far beyond the characterization of VAWP as a daily "occupational hazard" and "cost of doing politics," to be overcome quietly and steadfastly, necessitating "thick skins."

VAWP has become a key talking point within UK political chambers, political parties, international organizations, and in academic research, and many have explored these often-normalized gendered "costs of doing politics" for women politicians in national politics (Krook 2017, 2018, 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020; O'Connell and Ramshaw 2018; Och 2020). Notwithstanding this, the incidence and impact of VAWP in local government remains comparatively under-researched with few UK-focused studies. Furthermore, the majority of discussion and research has focused on VAWP perpetrated by members of the public, as the most common form, while a lesser extent has centered violence committed by peers alongside women in political chambers. Such behavior, instead, is often

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characterized as a consequence or example of gendered political culture, rather than violence. Peer-on-peer violence, however, is reframed here as a significant portion of the daily violence experienced by women politicians. This article addressed both of these gaps.

This article thus extends existing evidence of VAWP through exploring in-depth qualitative data on women local councilors' first-hand experiences in a UK context (Wales). It discusses the unique costs of VAWP in *local* government, arguing violence at this level places women, their families, and property, as well as their online presence, under intensified risk, compounded by fewer protections than are afforded to national politicians.

The article first outlines the current VAWP field and the Welsh context, before detailing the data collection process for this project. Participants' experiences of daily VAWP from the public and in the chamber are then discussed, including experiences of violence and feeling "at risk" whilst carrying out council work, daily violence within chambers, and the effect on women, their private lives, families, and political careers. Finally, reactions to and measures to prevent VAWP within local politics are detailed, critiquing the inadequate solutions currently adopted by councils and how women often adapt to prevent violence and risk *themselves*. This includes tactics which curtail and fetter women's political representation and participation. This article therefore concludes that more intervention is needed both academically and by local councils to fully understand and tackle the different forms, sites (in/by publics versus in chambers and by peers), impacts, and implications for women's political representation (descriptive and substantive) of violence against women *local* politicians.

The VAWP field

VAWP researchers generally accept that male politicians are not entirely immune from violence (Akhtar and Morrison 2019; Bjarnegård, Håkansson, and Zetterberg 2022; Erikson, Håkansson, and Josefsson 2023; Håkansson 2021; Holm, Bjarnegård, and Zetterberg 2024). However, the Violence Against Women in Politics field is distinguished by its centering of women politicians as victims of violence *because of* their gender, with the abuse itself being gendered (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020). The field contends that violence against *women* politicians is distinctly gendered in its motives, nature/forms, and impacts (see Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo's 2020). Previous research argues that whilst men tend to be attacked for their ideas or political actions (Citron 2014), women are targeted as "gendered beings [with] degrading comments that explicitly target them as women" (Erikson, Håkansson, and Josefsson 2023, 12). This can include gendered slurs and misogynistic hate speech as well as more serious forms of gendered violence like rape threats (Esposito and Breeze 2022; Fuchs and Schäfer 2021; Gorrell et al. 2020; Harmer and Southern 2021; Wagner 2022; Ward and McLoughlin 2020). Although this article does not address motives for VAWP as per Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020) framework, it does explore the forms and impacts of violence against women, specifically in Welsh local politics.

Defining violence

First, defining the term "violence" is necessary here, given its nebulous nature and plurality of meanings. In her book *Violence Against Women in Politics*, Krook (2020, 117) advocates for a "comprehensive approach," a delineation of violence, suggesting a typology that problematizes "the importance of intentionality, centers the experiences of survivors, and expands its temporal and personal effects." She argues that viewing violence as a "continuum" or "spectrum of acts seeking to deter and undermine women's political participation" allows for an all-encompassing, holistic understanding of the incidences and impact of VAWP (Krook 2020, 120–22). Building on this, a non-exhaustive definition of "violence" is operationalized here. Violence is understood as specific acts against women politicians, including those of a:

- physical;
- psychological (those acts which cause trauma and harm mental health and well-being, like death threats);
- sexual (including sexual harassment and unwanted advances);
- economic (which includes property damage),
- and semiotic nature (either through images or sexist language).

Violence is further understood to take place both in-person and digitally. Additionally, this article includes acts committed against those related or close to the woman politician (such as immediate family members including children and spouses and friends) in an effort to threaten, hurt, or intimidate the politician by extension. The impacts of violence are further understood in a more generalized form, outside of specific acts, as a perceived threat or feeling of being “at-risk,” considering that this often spills over into women and their families’ “normal” everyday life, affecting their political behaviors.

Notably, these definitions make no mention of limitations on who is committing these acts – this research is not solely concerned with acts perpetrated by the public but extends focus to acts committed by other actors including fellow politicians in council chambers and others engaged with in political work. Much research suggests that ordinary citizens are the perpetrators of *most* VAWP and that incidents often occur as politicians carry out political work visibly in their communities or in other political spaces including social media sites online (Collignon and Rüdig 2021; Håkansson 2021; Herrick et al. 2021; James et al. 2016). This is not directly countered here, but the wider feminist institutionalist analysis in the current study suggested that there was a considerable incidence of VAWP committed *within* council meetings and chambers by peers that could not be ignored. Women were recipients of daily gendered violence and micro-aggressions from those they already knew inside council chambers, including during formal political proceedings. These acts are often characterized in feminist institutionalist research as masculinized political behaviors legitimized by the gendered rules of the game (Lowndes 2014, 2020), but this article re-frames them as VAWP given that the acts were of similar severity and often took the same form as those committed by the public. Some have contended that women’s increased political presence, alongside generational attitudinal shifts and wider acceptance of gender equality goals, means sexual harassment has become less overt (Krook 2018; Lovenduski 2014; Trenow 2014), replaced by “male banter” (Farrell and Titcombe 2016), sexist humor, sexist language and comments, and discriminatory behavior. However, serious incidents still remain. In UK national politics, #WestminsterToo, a #MeToo-esque exposé in politics, revealed multitudinous reports and instances of inappropriate touching and unwanted sexual advances from men MPs toward women politicians and staff, with many investigated by their political parties, suspended, or permanently removed (The Jo Cox Civility Commission 2024; Krook 2018). At the local level, gendered political behaviors have come under less scrutiny given the lack of television or other media attention paid to proceedings. However, similar happenings are revealed here to be as pervasive, widespread, and importantly as legitimized by local institutional frameworks which fail to properly punish such behavior as a result of inadequate reporting mechanisms.

Extant global research on violence against women (local) politicians

Though research into violence against women local politicians in the UK remains limited, there has been attention drawn to the issue through various think tank reports (Fawcett 2017; McTernan 2024), and there is global evidence from other regions. In Italy, Daniele and Dipoppa (2017); see also Daniele, Dipoppa, and Pulejo (2023) found that local politicians received threatening letters or had been victims of arson, and in India, councilors have suffered property damage (Asian Human Rights Commission 2006) and online threats. In Latin America and Africa, multiple studies have found substantial evidence that women local politicians experience especially high levels of violence and abuse (Deetlefs and Serwat 2023; Phungula 2023; Quintanilla 2012; Semu-Banda 2008), including murder.

Latin American countries have also been the first to implement solutions, including criminalization, with varying levels of impact and success. For example, Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016) contend that concerns in Bolivia about VAWP became salient in the early 2000s following reports of violence against women in rural municipalities and were then tackled through a Bill which implemented a new reporting process. By 2012, “more than 4000 claims” had been made, yet women still remained at serious risk of violence, exemplified through the high-profile murder of a local councilwoman Juana Quispe. Resulting reforms of Bolivian legislative documents went further in protecting female candidates and elected politicians (among others) than similar proposals in the UK, comprehensively defining violence and harassment, and making violations criminal offenses with penalties including prison sentences. Other Latin American countries, including Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, and Peru, have followed suit and proposed similar bills and laws, suggesting much stronger attempts to counter VAWP at all political levels than we have seen in the UK. However, even these attempts to legislate against VAWP are found to be too weakly enforced, rendering them “empty promises” (Restrepo Sanín 2022b).

Generally, research argues that VAWP undermines and seeks to silence or detract from women’s political presence as a final attempt to maintain male dominance of political spaces. It weakens and limits achievements in descriptive, substantive, and symbolic political representation as it can prevent women from challenging the status quo (Collier and Raney 2019; Collignon and Rüdig 2021; Håkansson 2024b; Kosiara-Pedersen 2024; Restrepo Sanín 2022a). The evidence from Latin America shows that VAWP finds it limits policy changes and substantive representation and discourages prospective women politicians. Evidence from Victoria state local government in Australia found all councilors experienced similar levels of violence or “incivility,” yet women experienced more gender-based violence, and were more likely to cite this as a reason for not recontesting their seat in subsequent elections (Carson et al. 2024). Extant research across the globe therefore highlights the concerning impact of VAWP not only on women politicians’ personal safety, but further on the descriptive and substantive representation of women.

Therefore, whilst the VAWP field has collected ample evidence and data regarding violence from the public whilst carrying out political duties (online and offline), this article extends these understandings to incidences of VAMP at the local level and in local council chambers in the UK, contributing to a holistic understanding of the unique costs of women doing local politics.

The Welsh local government context

Wales is one of the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom and became a devolved nation in 1997. Subsequently, it has three core levels of political governance: national (Westminster), devolved (Senedd Cymru), and local (local councils). The focus of this study was on the local level (Figure 1 in gray). During the 2017–2022 electoral period, women comprised 28% of all local councilors across Wales’ 22 local authorities. Local councils in Wales vary significantly in terms of their size – both regarding the number of councilors and the number of constituents they represent. In 2023, Wales had an average population density of 1562.6 people per square kilometer (per sqKm); however, this ranges across local authority from Cardiff City Council, the most densely populated with 2585 persons per sqKm, to Powys which is the least densely populated with below 30 persons per sqKm. The most densely populated areas of Wales are concentrated in the geographical south of the country where Wales’ largest cities are concentrated alongside the historically densely populated, previously industrial areas such as the South Wales Valleys (comprised Rhondda Cynon Taf, Torfaen, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, and Blaenau Gwent, for example). Mid and north Wales have fewer densely populated areas and also have higher number of Welsh-speaking individuals. Consequently, councils in Wales are divided into three bands based on the population within the council city or borough area: Band A (more than 200,000; three councils); Band B (between 100,000 and 200,000; 12 councils); and Band C (less than 100,000 people; seven

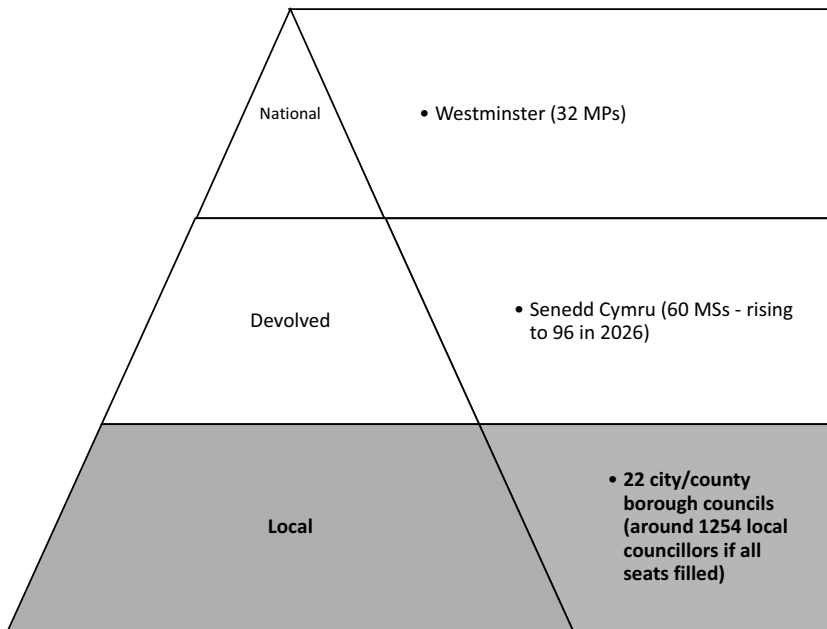


Figure 1. Diagram Showing the Three Core Levels of Governance in Devolved Wales (UK).

councils). Amongst other things, these bands determine remuneration levels of councilors with senior positions.

Looking closely at the political make-up of Welsh local government, local politics in Wales remains tied to traditional UK political parties with the majority of Welsh local councilors belonging to either the Labour Party, Conservative Party, Liberal Democrats, or Plaid Cymru (a Welsh political party; leans centre-left and has a strong focus on advocating for Welsh independence and the Welsh language). In local politics, some councilors are also Independent councilors who serve with no affiliation to any political party and stand for election on the basis of representing their local community, rather than on political party ideology or policies. This means they often have greater autonomy in the chamber to vote and make decisions without pressure from political party groupings or leadership, however, some will form an “Independent Group” with others in their council which acts as a loose alliance whilst still maintaining individual autonomy.

Local government in Wales is responsible for a range of services which affect the daily lives of residents (and particularly women), including but not limited to education, social services (adult and child), housing, and planning and development. On a practical level, being a local councilor is normally a part-time political role unless one holds a position of seniority. Backbench councilors, who are elected councilors with no extra responsibilities or senior positions, are expected to dedicate approximately 21 hours a week to their role, carry out normal political duties (scrutiny and policy-making) as well as case work with constituents. During the 2017–2022 electoral period studied, backbench councilors were paid circa £13,868 (universal basic remuneration), and those in senior positions were paid up to a maximum of £54,100 (Band A Council Leader) depending on the band of their council. As a result, local councilors who are below retirement age (currently 66) tend to be in some form of employment alongside their politics (either full- or part-time, or self-employment), making being a local councilor difficult to balance alongside family and professional responsibilities (see Hibbs 2022a, 2022b for further discussion).

Methods

The findings discussed here derive from a wider study on women's experiences as local councilors in Wales where data were collected through in-depth qualitative methods. Nineteen semi-structured interviews with serving women local councilors from four local councils were conducted during the 2017–2022 electoral period, and the ensuing analysis draws from 18 of these.¹ Participants and councils (see [Tables 1 and 2](#)) were chosen via purposive sampling to largely mirror the local political sphere at the time and to provide both typical and atypical cases. Councils were chosen based on their following characteristics: descriptive representation of women (ranging from 10% to over 40%), geographical and demographic nature (e.g., urban, rural, or post-industrial), and political party make-up. This research received ethical approval² following institutional ethics process within which the decision was made to anonymize councils and participants. Therefore, details provided for councils remain purposefully vague here, with identifiable information carefully omitted, particularly important when asking participants about sensitive topics such as VAWP.

Interviews were conducted between September 2019 and September 2020, with 11 taking place in-person and eight online during the Covid-19 Pandemic and subsequent local lockdowns in Wales. Online interviews were carried out via Zoom, Teams, or Skype for Business, and all interviews were recorded and researcher-transcribed to ensure closeness and familiarity with the data. Interview data were then thematically analyzed to prioritize the centering of women's voices and stories, identifying key patterns and recurrent experiences across the dataset. Given the feminist commitment to retaining voice when reporting data on women, interview quotations are left as full as possible here, particularly when stories of abuse and violence are discussed.

Table 1. Details of the Four Case Study Councils.

Council	Overall Descriptive Representation of Women (approx. %)	Gender of Leader and Deputy (Leader/Deputy)	Political Party Control
A	30–35%	Female/Male	Labour (majority)
B	30–35%	Male/Male	Labour (minority)
C	Over 35%	Male/Female	Labour (majority)
D	<15%	Female/Male	Plaid/Independent Coalition

Table 2. Details of Interviewees (Anonymized).

Council	Pseudonym	Year Elected	Political Party	Senior Position?
A	Ffion	2004	Welsh Labour	Council Leader
	Gwen	2012	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Rose	2012	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Mared	2004	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Sioned	2017	Independent	None
	Jacqueline	2017	Welsh Conservatives	Opposition Spokesperson (Education)
B	Theresa	2017	Welsh Conservatives	None
	Marie	2017	Welsh Labour	None*
	Tara	2015 (by-election)	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Mali	1999	Liberal Democrats	None**
C	Llinos	2012	Welsh Labour	None
	Ceri	1997ish	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Alys	2004	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Eleri	2017	Plaid Cymru	None
D	Samantha	1999	Plaid Cymru	Council Leader
	Angharad	2008	Plaid Cymru	Cabinet Member
	Nia	2004	Plaid Cymru	Cabinet Member
Pilot	Lara	2012	Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member
	Carys		Welsh Labour	Cabinet Member

Note: *Has become a cabinet member since data collection. **Was previously Leader of Council B.

Results and discussion

This article now moves to focus on the empirical findings from the study with regard to violence against women local politicians in Wales. First, findings regarding violence experienced and perpetrated by those outside of the chamber are discussed, including the acute sense of threat often felt by women when carrying out constituency work. Violence and daily microaggressions within the chamber are then explored with the understanding that these stacked to create an environment that women felt required a “thick skin” to endure. Finally, the impact of the foregoing sections is considered and the question of how VAWP in Welsh local government affects the descriptive and substantive representation of women, as well as their full political participation, is addressed.

From outside the chamber

One of the core causes of VAWP is the heightened visibility of politicians as public figures: publicly elected, identifiable, and accountable to their constituents. As in other political contexts, “ordinary citizens are behind a majority of the violence experienced by women politicians [and] powerful and visible women are at a heightened risk of violence compared to their male counterparts” (Håkansson 2024a, 1–2). However whilst others have commented on visibility often through seniority or media presence in national politics (Håkansson 2021, 2024a, 2024b; Kosiara-Pedersen 2024), here it was backbench *local* politicians’ unique visibility in standard daily life that put them at risk of violence. Many regard local politics as “lower stakes” in terms of decision-making, yet the public and intimate nature of local council meetings, constituencies, and a lack of requirement to spend prolonged periods of time away from home for political proceedings, mean local councilors are often the most visible politician in their area. Compounding this, councilors are commonly motivated to run for elected office by prior involvement in community-related groups or organizations (see Hibbs 2022a) and are already well-known, active community members – often a key factor in their being successfully elected. Local councilors also work or have previously worked within their local area in their professional lives,³ have or had children attending (or be otherwise involved with) local schools, and regularly attend public events in their constituencies without security. On the whole, this makes them generally more publicly accessible than MPs or Senedd Members (MS).

Interviewees here were acutely aware of this visibility and subsequent vulnerability, arguing, whilst this was beneficial for electoral campaigning and for dealing with local issues or case work, the negative impacts were more keenly felt. Ffion (Leader; Council A) stated:

Because local politicians are the nearest level, we’re the most familiar. I’ll walk down to the city center and people know who I am [...] they probably wouldn’t spot their MP. I’m *much more visible* [...] and that’s why we’re more visible and vulnerable to attacks. (*interviewee emphasis*)

She attested that, whilst politicians generally are victims of the “general vitriol” or contemporaneous “swamp” of general public distrust of UK politicians, as a local councilor she perceived her heightened local visibility to the electorate as leaving her more vulnerable to the attacks she had experienced. Ffion explained that she had been the victim of “horrendous” attacks and knew fellow councilors (women and men) in her council and elsewhere who had suffered similar in-person physical and verbal abuse and violence, or “had their property attacked as well” – as had other interviewees. Previous research elsewhere agrees (Collignon and Rüdiger 2021; Håkansson 2021; Harmer and Southern 2021), and media reports across Europe and the US cite local politicians as “closest to the people and the grassroots” (Herrezeel cited in Hernández-Morales 2024), causing vulnerability, with some being forced to move in with partners and being unable to “go anywhere in the city without feeling like [they were] being followed” (Rebecca Thompson, Michigan House, US).

Other participants also viewed being visible as a local councilor as the cause of many of the serious “costs” of doing politics. Lara (pilot interviewee) experienced issues with constituents showing up to

her doorstep at inappropriate times, blaming this on the comparative accessibility of local politicians whose addresses were then published on council websites:

First time around,⁴ [with] new babies, I used to have people turning up at the house, you'd have just got them to bed [...] you'd have someone ringing the doorbell.

Lara frames this as an “annoyance” here, reflecting the idea that inappropriate behaviors by the public are often reduced to mere “costs” of doing politics (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020) and are glossed over by both perpetrators and politicians. Accessibility equals susceptibility, and feelings of being “at risk” even in one’s home were common, alongside a lack of council-provided security. This leaves local women politicians the most vulnerable to VAWP in what should be their safest of spaces. Marie (Council B) concurred, arguing further that this heightened risk not only affected her individually, but extended to her children, who were also rendered as visible and vulnerable:

I’m very easily identifiable in the community, and so are my children. Your address is all over *everywhere* - everybody knows [...] Within the first few weeks of being elected, I came back from a late meeting and my kids were scared because an angry man knocked at the door because he’d been given a parking fine [...] you’re really quite exposed now as a single woman [...] very often put into compromising situations which I didn’t consider well before standing.

As elsewhere, women are more likely to be approached by “an aggrieved citizen [as] gendered double standards operate subtly to increase women politicians’ vulnerability to violence” (Håkansson 2024a, 23), but at the local level, it is not just women councilors themselves who are at-risk of possible violence and harassment but also, by extension of visibility in the immediate community, family members become targets. This was clearly aggravated by the publication of home addresses during the 2017–2022 Welsh local government electoral period. As of 2022, regulations removed the requirement on councils to make members’ addresses available for public inspection;⁵ however, councilors remain active citizens whose addresses can easily be found out through either tracking them whilst out in the area, or through historical knowledge in the community: people talk. This has been reported by city or municipal councilors in the United States, including Daniela Fernandez who stated that “in a town of 3000, people know where you live, that’s pretty terrifying” (Sisson 2022).

The heightened visibility of local councilors increases threat and risk of VAWP and is therefore a worrying local-specific cost of doing politics, especially when councilors have no choice but to be active in their wards. Carrying out constituency work was viewed crucial for being a “good” councilor worthy of reelection, yet was an activity where women felt most at-risk. This began pre-election when canvassing – catching voters at home means canvassing in the evenings and “going out campaigning at night on your own,” causing feelings of vulnerability “particularly as a woman” (Marie). This was heightened for Council D interviewees Angharad, Samantha, and Nia, which was a very rural area with dark roads and lanes with separate, detached houses and farms with long driveways and little street lighting.

Once elected, the risks become greater, with councilors, unlike MPs whose staff often carry out case work, carrying out their own case work in their local communities either at surgeries or more riskily in constituents’ homes. Research in Northern Ireland similarly finds that “carrying out constituency business exposes elected women to risk, particularly when they are [...] visiting constituents” (Turner and Swaine 2021, 14). Participants discussed feeling vulnerable and anxious when asked to attend residents’ homes to discuss issues or complaints, particularly male constituents, expressing concerns about whether this was safe:

Angharad: I’ll sometimes say, “OK, well, I better not go to this [man’s] house on my own.” I’m aware then that I’m a woman on my own, maybe a man wouldn’t necessarily think that. If I’m going to see a woman, I wouldn’t necessarily worry about that.

As suggested by Angharad (Council D), this was perceived as a gendered mind-set – male councilors were not perceived to make the same mental weighing-up process before carrying

out such duties. This was unfortunately often based on past experiences where women had felt unsafe and at-risk:

Theresa: I have gone to people's houses before and been led through multiple rooms, like all the way to some back exit of their house and then that person actually had a problem with public toilets closing. Like he was talking about his genitals. And I was kind of like, "Oh my God I'm deep in this this guy's house," if I want to get to the front door like it's three minutes to get through the house. [...] And this old man is telling me about his penis and you just think like there's so many ways this could go that I would like not have any way out of, you know?

As is discussed later, mentally deliberating on an exit strategy, as Theresa recalls here, was just one tactic women adopted to plan ahead in the face of possible violence and alleviate some of their vulnerability during constituency work. Marie explicitly mentioned the *gendered* aspect of vulnerability, worrying specifically about the risk of gender-based, sexual violence, stating that "I think as a woman I feel particularly vulnerable about that, you know, being worried about being sexually assaulted." Other research has found local women politicians to be "more likely to have experienced" sexual violence, suggesting this worry is well-founded (Kosiara-Pedersen 2024, 230).

Violence from outside the chamber also included that which took place in digital spaces. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016, 6) found that "social media have become the number one place in which psychological violence [...] is perpetrated against women parliamentarians." Indeed, Akhtar and Morrison (2019) found that every single UK MP had reported experiencing abuse via social media. Online attacks are not reserved for national politicians or women, however, and women and men local councilors have quit following online personal attacks (see Duggan 2022 about former Pembrokeshire Cllr Huw George). This was a commonly raised issue amongst participants, many of whom had experienced first-hand the trolling and hate comments, as well as serious death threats, raised in other research on online VAWP (Akhtar and Morrison 2019; Carson et al. 2024; Erikson, Håkansson, and Josefsson 2023; Holm, Bjarnegård, and Zetterberg 2024). Social media specifically offers new sites for VAWP, heightened by what Suler (2004) deems a "toxic disinhibition effect" and dissociative anonymity where offenders "don't have to face their own behavior." Cyber VAWP had affected all participants and was a universal concern for interviewees, often raised as something that may discourage possible future women politicians. Participants here viewed women as the more common victims of cyber violence, with Lara stating "more women say that they have issues than men," again with visibility increasing its incidence ("those with much more active social media presence, the abuse quadruples" – Theresa), and others viewing the abuse itself as gendered in nature, specifically targeting them because they were a woman. Theresa and Marie both recounted particularly serious incidents of receiving death threats on social media, and women leaders and cabinet members were also disproportionate victims. Interviewees stated their belief that women are "more susceptible to social media trolling" (Ffion), describing their experiences variously as "barrages," "slagging off," "sounding off in a nasty way," "horrendous," and "horrible social media abuse." Ffion had experienced such bad trolling and hate speech that police had been involved and all other women interviewed from Council A mentioned her negative experiences:

Sioned: [Ffion's] had loads of bad press [...] used to be on Facebook but had to take herself off [...] had it really bad, threats and all sorts [...] attacks on her house.

Worryingly, Sioned's quote implies that, contrary to Suler's assertion, online violence against Ffion had escalated to offline attacks on person and property. This suggests a unique characteristic of VAWP at the local level: online attacks can more easily become "offline" in nature as local women are more "reachable."

Violence perpetrated by the public therefore takes a unique form and is a heightened threat at the local level with women experiencing acrimonious visits to their homes, vulnerabilities whilst carrying out constituency work, and online abuse that can worryingly spill-over into offline violence. This suggests a re-framing of violence from often having faceless and unknown perpetrators at the national level to an enhanced threat of being committed by those in the woman's immediate community who she sees everyday, and by those women councilors who are actively trying to help.

VAWP within the chamber

Disappointingly, VAWP does not only come from the public but is also perpetrated by those sitting next to women in council chambers. Gendered harassment, daily micro-aggressions, micro-machismos, and hostile sexism are a common feature of political institutions (Och 2020). These daily forms of VAWP are an informal mechanism through which male politicians resist women's increased political presence, defending their historically dominant status in the gendered political hierarchy: "women in politics describe experiencing violence from powerful co-partisans who oppose women challenging male political dominance" (Håkansson 2024a, 4). The extension of the definition and understanding of violence here to include these "masculine political behaviors" means that we see the "stacked" impact of daily violence against women and the targeted wearing down of women in an attempt to silence them in the chamber.

Multiple women in this study experienced violence, abuse, and harassment from men councilors. Experiences ranged from sexist comments to unwanted sexual advances:

Ceri: I was told by one man I'd be better off in the kitchen with a tea-towel cooking, than I would in the political arena.

Sioned: Some of the male councilors, the older ones, [are] chauvinistic pigs [and] try and put women down all the time.

Long-serving and newer councilors were interviewed here, and whilst there was a sense that councils and male councilor behavior had improved in some ways, the findings here do not suggest an automatic or complete "re-gendering" of political behaviors when proportions of women increase past token representation (Childs and Lena Krook 2008; Dahlerup 1988, 2006; Kanter 1977). Those participants who had been elected in the 1990s and early 2000s described the councils they had entered as "macho," "old boys' clubs" that were like "stepping back into 1970," organized in such a way that privileged male presence, silencing women who were not "allowed to speak until after [the men] had their say" (Ceri) – Mali described a "whole system geared around male." Others experienced incidents of "benevolent sexism" (Glick and Fiske 1996; Håkansson 2024a) and patronization at the hands of men in the 1990s who treated them like "a daughter or their granddaughter [...] a bit paternalistic." However, these longer-serving councilors perceived that they *had* since benefitted from some renegotiation of the "rules of the game" (Lowndes 2005, 2014, 2020) throughout the 2000s as more women entered the political arena and shifted the minority-majority split from "token" to "skewed" or even "balanced" ratios in some councils (Kanter 1977). This may reflect generational attitudinal shifts regarding gender equality found elsewhere (Elder, Greene, and Lizotte 2021; Taylor and Scott 2018) whereby, as with society generally, younger councilors "in their 20s and 30s" (Lara) have begun rejecting the more traditional, overtly sexist, attitudes, and behaviors of their predecessors.

The newer councilors, elected in the late 2000s and 2010s, perceived there to have already been a cultural shift in the years before their election, although there were still some "hangovers" identified from the old boys' clubs including semiotic violence in the form of sexist comments like "what do you know? You're a woman!" and "They can make [trains] in any colour you like, love, even Laura Ashley!" Gwen argued that Council A was a "welcoming environment" when she was elected in 2012, something attributed to "a mind-shift – it was like the old school tie [before], but I've never come across any [sexism] to be honest." However, Rose, who was elected to Council A in 2012, did recall that some remnants of a traditional, masculinized council culture remained, with a "tea and toast lady" tending to councilors in the Member's Room, and had experienced overt unwanted sexual advances:

In my first term, some long-serving colleagues were a bit inappropriate [...] I've never worn my wedding ring but I did start to wear it again. Which is a reflection of sometimes how I felt uncomfortable by some of the interactions [...] but yeah, as a kind of symbolic more, I did put [it] on again.

The feeling of pressure to wear a signifier of her marriage suggests an environment where women without partners were seen as “fair game,” echoing evidence elsewhere that women are often forced to disclose personal relationships with other men (true or as deception) to prevent or curtail unwanted advances whilst maintaining the man’s honor (Stratmoen, Rivera, and Saucier 2020). Rose did reflect that “things have moved on” since her first term, something she partly attributed to the fact that the perpetrators of these comments were “no longer councilors” either through retirement or death.

Other examples of daily semiotic violence included micro-aggressions – participants being spoken over in meetings, not being called upon by chairs to speak, men excluding them from conversations, and men stealing their ideas. Whilst many may not characterize these as “violence,” Krook (2022) argues these are common techniques for silencing women and have the same impact as overt sexist comments when they take place as regularly as participants described here. Indeed, in interviews women seemed wearied by them. Other interviewees were clear that the political styles of local council chambers were often couched in aggression and combativeness, with shouting and yelling apparent: “I find shouting abhorrent, and I’ve been in that chamber at times and I’ve cringed” (Ceri).

Any VAWP from fellow elected politicians is clearly concerning, and the presence of such political behaviors *within* council chambers, where women must be present to do their elected duty, constitutes a clear threat to women’s political participation and representation. Theresa mentioned that she and other women came across as “cowed” in the chamber, preferring not to speak up in debates as would “immediately then [be] shouted down [facing] braying men on the other side of the bench.” Unfortunately, such behaviors were often underplayed or normalized, with many of the women openly stating that they would not report such behaviors. In interviews, a few women boasted of their thick skins, priding themselves on their resilience and conveying a sense of satisfaction or smugness that they were able to ignore and cope with acts that other, “lesser” women in the chamber could not overcome. These “cowed” women like Theresa were spoken of by other interviewees derogatorily and labeled women who “can’t contribute” and were “not good enough” to be present. For example, Marie argued that women should not become councilors if they do not already have the “capabilities,” using this as an argument against positive action and stating that “we shouldn’t be afraid to say to a woman ‘you are not good enough.’” Jacqueline also mentioned that, whilst she would like to see more women in her Conservative group in Council A, it needed to be those who “[are] not afraid to speak up in that formal setting [...] a woman who’s not afraid to speak her mind,” reflecting the arguments explored earlier that resilience and a strong character were considered necessary prerequisites. Furthermore, many may be dissuaded from reporting these lower key occurrences complaints have to reach a certain threshold before they are investigated (discussed in the next section).

Comparatively, little research exists into the experiences of local councilors in Wales, with only a handful of other studies. However, Farrell and Titcombe’s (2016) research on the gendered experiences of Welsh local council members within councils found overt sexism existed, concluding that Welsh local councils remain “old boy’s clubs.” Female local councilors in their study often felt patronized and bullied by older male councilors and also experienced sexist comments including (Farrell and Titcombe 2016, 877): “Women have little feet so they can stand closer to the sink,” and “Well lads, I won’t object to looking at that for the next four years!” However, male councilors reported that gender discrimination did not happen in Welsh councils due to improvements in women’s descriptive representation since 1996. Where a sexist culture was identified, interviewees blamed older local council members whose attitudes and behavior, they believed, reflected the historical rural Welsh culture of “pits, chapel and tradition.” It is therefore interesting to see through interviewee experiences discussed here that, whilst a general shift was recognized, these behaviors were perceived to have not yet been fully eradicated and VAWP remains as rife within chambers as outside them.

The impact of VAWP in local government

These incidents and the daily threat of VAWP in Welsh local government as detailed here had a considerable impact on women's political participation and representation, particularly in the ways they "did politics." In spite of participants' views that women politicians require a "thick skin," many in the study had taken precautions and steps to reduce their visibility and vulnerability to violence which themselves impact women's descriptive and substantive representation. Firstly, the aforementioned risk felt when visiting constituents' homes had led to changed behaviors in carrying out case work, as women "thought twice" about how they performed their councilor duties. Angharad, for example, stated she would take her husband (a Town Councilor⁶) or "arrange for a colleague to go [with her]," something she saw as "just common sense." Theresa explained her boyfriend, also an elected councilor, was similarly aware of the risks and "preferred [her] to just say 'No, I'm not comfortable with that, we'll have to do it over the phone,'" would go with or would urge her to take someone with her if she had to attend a constituent's home. Other interviewees would offer their constituents an alternative means of engagement, such as a telephone call, meeting at the council building, or encouraging them to attend a local, public surgery. This echoes findings elsewhere which suggest that women politicians are generally "decreasing their availability to constituents" to protect themselves (Håkansson 2024b). At the national level, this means no longer holding constituency surgeries (Krook 2020, 250). However whilst local politicians are mirroring this stepping back, the starting point for them was intimate, private spaces (constituents' homes), and the more public spaces like surgeries avoided by women MPs (or just being accompanied) were seen as the solution. This perhaps talks to the fact that being a good *local* politician is perceived to be linked to more intimate (and more risky) presence in the community than at national level. Indeed, taking steps back from the public completely as MPs are doing could have serious ballot-box consequences for women local politicians as being visible remains a key expectation from voters and thus a determinant of electoral success.

Participants had taken similar steps to prevent online abuse, choosing to remove themselves from social media platforms. The majority had not reported online VAWP to their council "unless it was something really bad" (Samantha), with most again accepting it as a more modern cost of doing politics, implying a normalization of online violence against women politicians even when death threats are received. Theresa characterized her experience of a death threat as "annoying" and had simply removed herself from most social media as she "didn't want to put [her]self in that position," asking "why subject myself to that?" Similarly, Mared stated that "I don't go on social media anymore, I've come off everything which means you don't know sometimes what's going on, but then again I've just said I'm not doing it." As Mared suggests, removing herself from social media again decreases both her visibility and her ability to be "in the know" with local issues, but was a necessary step to protect herself from VAWP.

The framing of taking steps to protect themselves as commonsensical suggests that feeling "at-risk" was an expected cost of doing local politics as a woman, but further that women councilors have internalized the responsibility to protect *themselves* despite evidence from this study suggesting VAWP is usually experienced regardless. Advice given by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) as well as individual Councils' advice pages is worryingly framed solely around councilors ensuring their *own* "personal safety" in many situations related to VAWP. For example, during elections, guidance advises candidates to canvass poorly lit areas in daytime, "canvass in groups or pairs for safety," "establish a code word," and to "use tracking apps for mobile phones." Whilst these solutions may be easily achievable for national politicians with support from large political party branches with minimal disruption to campaign activities (Collignon and Rüdiger 2021), at the local level, especially candidates for smaller parties with little people-power or candidates who work and have to campaign in evenings, candidates are forced to choose between feelings of susceptibility and

vulnerability or a lower profile in the election. Once elected, councilors have the onus put on them for their safety, including:

- “Always make sure that someone knows where you are going, and what times you are expected to return. Walk away from situations you consider threatening.”
- “Try not to hold surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building [...] Multi-Member Ward representatives may wish to arrange surgeries at the same time at the same location.” (Welsh Local Government Association 2023)

Similarly to this guidance, the WLGA and LGA, whilst admitting that “particularly women are often the target” of online abuse, again place the onus on councilors to follow suggested steps to “minimize the risk,” urging them: “Don’t feed the troll!” and “Don’t tweet or post on Facebook when you are ‘tired or emotional.’” Again, this guidance places responsibility at the feet of the councilor to prevent and react to online abuse by: getting familiar with platform settings and blocking, muting, reporting, or deleting comments and users, leading by example, and considering the content they post, defusing conflict themselves.

Some councils have positively taken tangible steps to ensure councilor safety, albeit usually at the request of those who have *already* experienced violence and extended harassment from members of the public: a reactive, rather than preventative approach. Such strategies include separate mobile phones and devices for council work, home intruder alarms, police hotlines, personal alarms, and increased security staff and procedures in council buildings. Marie, for example, who had received threats by a man constituent with previous sexual offenses convictions (eventually arrested and imprisoned), had heightened security checks and was “given an alarm to carry around.” Councilors elsewhere have also been encouraged to “check in/under their cars before they get in” and sure-up home security with Ring doorbells. In the US, aforementioned local politician Fernandez had, similarly to councilors here, taken personal steps to ensure her and her families safety including installing security cameras and, as permitted in her state, had purchased a personal firearm (Sisson 2022). One Welsh council has implemented an “Unacceptable Actions by Citizens” policy that allows staff and councilors to terminate contact with a citizen who shows “aggressive or abusive behavior, unreasonable demands, and unreasonable persistence.” However, it is clear that little generally is being done to address the root of these issues, and that attitudes toward and expectations of local politicians must change, or women will continue to face the decision between being a “good” councilor and their and their family’s safety.

Feminist institutionalist analysis in this study reveals Welsh local government as a political institution still ripe with sexual harassment, sexist comments, and other forms of gendered violence within chambers. Councils remain resistant to re-gendering with daily violence breaking and undermining established codes of conduct yet remaining unchallenged and unreported. A key factor in this is the unsuitability of the reporting systems in local government, echoing claims by Collier and Raney (2018) that even the introduction via nesting of regulatory frameworks or “institutional rules” about sexual harassment cannot overcome the intransigence of old, historically masculine institutions. Correspondingly, sexism and gendered violence against women in Welsh council chambers was not the result of a few “bad apples” but was reflective of a historically institutionalized acceptance of daily acts of sexual harassment, overt and ambivalent sexism, and gendered discrimination. Approaches to dealing with VAWP perpetrated by councilors themselves within chambers and council meetings are found wanting. Reporting processes are cumbersome, requiring lengthy form-filling and meetings with council staff, and complaints about Codes of Conduct (CoC) breaches still must then be judged “serious enough” by the Ombudsman to warrant further investigation. Therefore, only the worst incidents pass the threshold to be dealt with by the Adjudication Panel for Wales (APW), and even then comparatively lenient sanctions seem to be awarded for VAWP than for financial cases or failures to declare interests. For example, in 2019 male Cllr Roderick of Powys County Council was referred to the APW for “slapping a female councilor’s bottom” during a meeting with a National Park authority

and then subsequently threatening to “relay information about ‘her behavior’ to her husband” if she reported him. Whilst the Chair of the APW said Roderick had behaved in a way that has “long been deemed unacceptable in public life,” he was only ordered to serve a 4-month suspension and has since returned as an elected councilor. Fellow councilors defending him during proceedings excused his behavior as the result of his being a “farmer, not a sophisticate” and “not used to the heightened formality and niceties of committee meetings.”

Similarly, Flintshire councilor Bernie Attridge, who abused his power as a councilor and sent extremely sexually explicit and harassing messages including “*so when are you going to let me eat you out then?*”⁷ and “*you got me feeling all horny now,*” something he excused as the result of a “nervous breakdown,” was recently given only a 4-month suspension. In direct contrast, Cllr Kevin O'Neill was suspended for 7 months for incidences of failing to declare interests in a property in a council meeting, and Cllr Donald Jenkins was disqualified from being or becoming a member of a local government authority for 15 months for misleading Audit Wales. Sexist and misogynistic behaviors and VAWP thus remain comparatively under-punished by sanctions and are often excused as simple “mistakes” by fellow councilors – treating them as minor behavioral issues, not violence. These examples raise questions regarding how VAWP is treated by adjudication and complaints procedures, suggesting a legitimization of misogynistic behaviors, and a centrally held belief these are less serious than financial or reputational breaches of CoCs. Women, therefore, seem well justified in believing that reporting such incidents will not result in sanctions worthy of the effort required to file a complaint and will simply ignore semiotic and other violence from peers.

Other studies on VAWP find a variety of impacts of gendered violence on women's political representation, from depressed ambition, to women standing down. Women are often seen to dropout or “fall off the ladder” first (Allen 2012a, 2012b) and the costs of doing politics as detailed here clearly have a measurably significant impact on this. In the UK, 18 women MPs stood down in 2019, several publicly citing the costs of doing politics including abuse and inhospitable political cultures, whilst in Canada, local politicians and mayors like France Bélisle (Gatineau mayor until February 2024) cited hostile work environments as curtailing their willingness and desire to remain in politics (Banerjee 2024). In Wales, former-MS Bethan Sayed experienced sexist and racial attacks which contributed to her decision to not seek reelection to the Senedd (Dafydd 2018), and other Welsh women politicians have been open and frank about the abuse they've experienced and asking themselves “would I want my daughter, my sister to be in this role?” (Sioned Williams MS, cited in Evans 2024). VAWP was similarly framed by Carson et al. (2024) participants as an “added strain” which compounded the challenges associated with the already gendered nature of the “triple duty” in local politics. Often it was the tipping point in decisions to step away from the political sphere – a phenomenon also echoed here in Wales.

This study highlights these impacts on descriptive representation. Participants were keenly aware, for example, that especially as the online shift in VAWP meant that the risk of being harassed, intimidated, and abused was now reality for most local politicians, this also affected the propensity of women to stand for election. Interviewees rightly asked: “why would women want to do it?” (Mared). When asked whether they encouraged other women to stand, it was experiences of VAWP that made interviewees less likely to recommend the role to prospective women politicians. Alternatively, they would find themselves purposefully “leaving out” the negative aspects of political life when talking to others about being a local councilor:

Lara: I feel a bit of an obligation to talk about the positive side [...] if all you see are the horror stories [...] why would you want to stand?

However, many were aware that stories of councilor abuse, and the publicly known sexism of local government in Wales was often mentioned by women they tried to encourage into politics as something that “put them off.” As Mared summarized: “it's women that are attacked in vile and awful ways, why on earth would they want to become a councilor?”

Informal support for dealing with VAWP was scarce as women interviewees did not mention the role of support groups or other women in coping with the impact of experiences of violence. Cross-

party networks were generally eschewed by participants here due to overwhelmingly partisan nature of councils and even intra-party women's groups were further not often active either. Councils themselves were found wanting and as such it was families and friends who, despite being possible victims themselves, were often relied upon for most support.

Discussion - theoretical and empirical contributions

This article makes a crucial intervention in the extant literature on violence against women in politics by showing how violence in local politics in Wales constitutes a different form of violence with its own unique acute and “close-to-home” impacts and implications for women's substantive and descriptive political representation. Furthermore, through exploring violence *within* council chambers among peers and its effects, this article also highlights the necessity to refocus our definitions of masculinized political behavior as violence, and the need for institutions to be proactive rather than reactive in their addressing of violence against women in local politics.

Violence against women in politics is commonly reported through the lens of how it impacts the woman politician, with an emphasis on one-off in-person attacks or the combination of various violent acts over time online. In this instance, importantly what we see is that the impact of violence against women in local politics regularly reaches further than the woman politician herself – affecting children, spouses, property, and a general sense of safety in everyday life off and online. The experience of violence for local women politicians is more intense, close to, and in many cases, *at* her home, and acute. Rather than a distant or detached, perhaps online and possibly anonymous or faceless, threat, women in local politics are shown to be at risk of violence from those in their immediate community – in their homes, their streets, at the school gates, at the shops, and in community online groups, for example. Violence against women in local politics must therefore be understood as distinct from that often experienced by women at the national level. Whilst no interviewees had experienced the severe cases that often make national news (though some knew those who had), the constancy of the threat of violence against local women politicians by those in the immediate community caused an acute sense of threat to safety. Councils were not taking enough preventative action and, consequently, VAWP was perceived a critical factor in discouraging women from becoming and/or remaining local politicians. VAWP is therefore a real threat to the descriptive representation of women in local government.

Regarding peer-on-peer violence, women here gave multiple examples of times they felt discriminated against, and where violence had been committed against them by fellow councilors. However, these were often not standalone or scarce examples, they were perceived and relayed as almost-daily occurrences which ground women down or required constant resilience to overcome. Women had to cope emotionally and psychologically with almost-constant sexism (both ambivalent and overt), discrimination, and micro-machismos due to the aggressive, combative nature of council chambers. Acts of VAWP within council chambers constituted a significant threat to substantive representation and quashed the contributions of would-be critical actors, making them uncomfortable and disinterested in participating and speaking in the chamber. Council codes of conducts and reporting/monitoring systems remain unfit for purpose and, when complaints are escalated to the highest level, gendered violence treated less punitively than financial breaches.

Conclusion

This research suggests that VAWP in Welsh local councils risks a reproduction and self-fulfilling prophecy regarding the types of people who enter into and stay in political space in Welsh local government – “grey men in grey suits” (Charles and Jones 2013). The experiences of the women discussed throughout this article, and the resulting firm understanding amongst participants that politics requires a strong personality to “cope,” mean that women who do not see themselves as able to withstand these costs of doing politics, yet who would bring fresh and important perspectives to the

table, are excluded or dissuaded. VAWP may thus limit the representation of diverse women with lived experience of other gender-based violence, with disability, cognitive or mental health conditions, and women with young children who are conscious that heightened visibility and susceptibility for themselves could also place their children in harm's way. Heightened visibility as a councilor causes uniquely local VAWP impacts for women, leaving them more susceptible, and with fewer tools to prevent or alleviate incidents. Women's presence in local politics is fettered, curtailing future progress toward equal descriptive and substantive representation, and the full political participation of women. The impact of VAWP is therefore concerning for the future political representation of women in local politics, particularly given its effect on the public perception of what being a woman politician is like. This raises serious questions about the attractiveness of local politics for prospective women politicians, often heralded as the gateway into politics for younger politicians who later aspire to Senedd or Westminster positions. Whilst this article has only considered the forms and impacts of VAWP, solutions must therefore be taken to address its roots, and mitigate its effects or local government in Wales will remain characterized by violence against women within and without its chambers.

Notes

1. Nineteen interviews in total were conducted including two pilot interviews with women from a council outside of the four detailed here. Following non-response to a request for further consent to include data in presentations of research findings, only data from one of these pilot interviews is included in analysis.
2. This research was approved by Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee under reference SREC/2775. Informed consent was sought and participants either physically or digitally signed consent forms.
3. Backbench local councilors in Wales are required to spend approximately 21 hours per week on their role and, in 2019–20 when these interviews took place, remuneration for this was £13,868. Therefore, a younger councilor is likely to also be working alongside their elected duties.
4. Here, Lara is referring to the time when she was a councilor in the late 1990s.
5. Members' home or primary addresses are therefore no longer available to the public, and councils (including Councils A through D here) have taken steps to protect members through, by default, publicizing council office postal addresses as means of receiving public communications.
6. Town and Community Councils operate at a level below City or County Borough Councils, rendering them an ultra-local form of politics.
7. To "eat someone out" is a British slang phrase used to denote the performance of oral sex on a woman.

Data Access Statement

Due to ethical concerns regarding possible identification of council case study sites and individual interviewee participants, the raw interview data for this research cannot be made available. This is due to the small pool of possible participants (i.e. given the low numbers of women in Welsh local government), and the nature of discussions as including sensitive and personal stories about political experiences, including harassment and violence as discussed here. All data presented in the body of this article have undergone a stringent anonymisation procedure to remove all possible identifiers and reduce as much as possible the risk of anonymity being breached.

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