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POLICY BRIEF

Candidate ≠ candidate

When gender inequality hinders women political candidates

Study on sexism during the June 2024 election period in Belgium

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Objectives of the study

To understand whether, how, and why election candidates are targets of sexism; to assess its consequences and to propose strategies for combating sexist behaviour during election campaigns.

Methods

The study analysed 43,937 reactions to 2,922 messages posted on X, Facebook, and Instagram by 40 candidates in the regional, federal, and European elections of June 9, 2024. Each reaction was examined to determine its tone, the presence of sexism, and its characteristics. Additionally, the analysis focused on identifying which types of candidates and messages received particular types of reaction and from whom.

Furthermore, 8 exploratory interviews were conducted with women politicians and journalists as key observers of the political landscape, along with 17 semi-structured interviews with candidates after the elections, to document their experiences and understand the consequences of sexism and the strategies developed to counteract it.

Key findings

1. **Sexism is expressed by significantly more aggressiveness** toward women candidates than men candidates **on social networks**. When candidates post messages during the election campaign, nearly one in two reactions is negative (especially on X, less so on Facebook and Instagram). These negative reactions are more common toward women candidates than men candidates. In particular, women candidates receive negative responses directed at politicians or politics in general much more frequently than men candidates. While the content of these negative reactions is not always explicitly sexist, women receive them more often. Furthermore, the authors of negative and/or sexist reactions toward women candidates are mostly men (68% men, 16% unknown, and 15% women).
2. **Sexism is also evident in the different treatment** of women and men candidates. On social networks, women candidates receive more sexist reactions than men candidates, often focused on physical characteristics (31% of sexist reactions directed at women candidates) or in the form of sexist insults (29%) or mansplaining (10%). However, such behaviour is not limited to the online world. One candidate, for example, noted, "It's dirty looks at my young colleagues or comments saying 'yes, we'd vote for that one'". Beyond aggressive and negative behaviour, women candidates report receiving fewer opportunities than men candidates. In the media and within political parties, sexism manifests as mansplaining, the confinement of women candidates to gendered roles, and a feeling of not being treated as equals.
3. **Sexism is expressed in both hostile and benevolent ways**. Hostile sexism (i.e., explicit sexism) is more commonly seen online (57% of sexist reactions to candidates) and is more frequently directed at posts on political content rather than personal topics. Benevolent sexism (a subtler form of sexism) appears both online and offline, accounting for 23% of sexist reactions to candidates on social networks. Comments such as "You're nice" may be well-intentioned but focus on the candidate's gender rather than the content of her message.
4. **Sexism intersects with other factors of discrimination** that affect candidates both on and off social networks. Younger women candidates and candidates from minority groups - particularly those with immigrant background - are more frequently targeted by attacks or subjected to unequal treatment. For instance, 63% of reactions to posts by women candidates with immigrant background are negative, compared to 31% for women without immigrant background. As one candidate explained, "These people always refer us to this pseudo lack of legitimacy that we would have because we

have to prove more as women. As racialised women, we always have to be beyond reproach”.

5. **Sexism leads to self-censorship among women candidates**, limiting their interactions with voters, both online and offline. As one candidate described, “It’s exactly the same as in real life, when we explain the avoidance strategies that women have when taking certain streets. You can transpose that to online life, in other words, you develop avoidance strategies: not talking about certain subjects, not reading comments, not doing this, not doing that”. These avoidance behaviours also manifest offline (such as choices around how to dress, what topics to discuss, and where and when to go places). Sexism can prematurely end women’s political careers and have profound personal consequences for their mental well-being and private lives. These harmful effects of sexism indirectly undermine the political influence of women as a group.
6. Sexism also has significant **indirect consequences**, as it **dampens the political ambition** of potential women candidates. Witnessing sexist behaviour directed at women candidates can make women citizens hesitate to pursue political careers themselves, recognising the challenges their role models endure, which in turn makes it even more difficult for parties to recruit new women candidates.

Combating sexism in election campaigns

When it is sexist, people need to know

Identifying sexism is particularly challenging. A definition that limits sexism to only hostile or explicit forms may cause politicians, the media, or the general public to overlook its omnipresence. The study highlights that sexism is present in many areas through more implicit forms, such as the systematically different treatment of men and women candidates on social networks, within political parties, and in the media. **Naming sexism is essential both to prevent this type of behaviour and to support candidates who are subjected to it.** In light of this, the study proposes:

- Running a campaign to raise awareness on the various forms of sexism, particularly less visible forms like the different treatment of women and men.
- Developing an easily accessible online toolbox to facilitate awareness-raising and coaching sessions, enabling every local party branch, newspaper editorial office and every political institution can grasp it easily.

Political parties, media, public services – you’re up!

The study reveals that women in politics often face sexism alone, especially those running for election without an existing political mandate. For these candidates, politics is not a full-time job, and they have limited access to institutional support. Although sexism is a systemic issue, addressing its effects is left to individual candidates, while the responsibility of political parties, election-organising public services, and the media remains diffuse. Since sexism is often defined in narrow terms (hostility and attacks), candidates have only existing legal tools at their disposal. However, if sexism is understood as the systematic different treatment of candidates based on gender, then systemic actors bear a responsibility to prevent and address it. **It is therefore crucial to hold political parties, public services, and media accountable for recognising the prevalence of sexism and its impact on candidates.** The following measures are recommended:

- Political parties should develop a mentoring system, pairing new women candidates with more experienced women candidates during campaigns. The study shows that experience helps women develop resilience toward sexism and strategies to reduce their visibility as targets.

- Political parties should build a support network for women candidates facing sexism to reduce isolation.
- Public services organising elections should conduct information sessions to better prepare candidates for dealing with sexism, particularly on social networks.
- Political parties should sign a charter outlining concrete actions to prevent and tackle sexism in politics.
- Parties, media groups, and political institutions should designate contact persons to support targets of sexism, offering resources from psychological counselling to assistance with filing complaints.

Monitor sexism to respond to it!

This study is one of the first to specifically monitor sexist comments and practices during election campaigns in Belgium, providing an objective view of part of the phenomenon. However, it is limited to the May-June 2024 election campaign. **Developing permanent quantitative and qualitative monitoring tools** is essential to observe sexism over time and better understand its full complexity. It is therefore essential to:

- Compare the prevalence of sexism over time (both within and outside the electoral cycle) and across different levels of power.
- Replicate research designs similar to this study, combining quantitative methods (such as extending the social network content analysis to traditional media) with qualitative methods (such as developing focus groups or ethnographic methods) to capture how sexism manifests in various dimensions.



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