

The Importance of Gender-Based Violence in Politics: An Interview with Tracey Raney

by Tracey Raney and Adebola Esther Osegboun

Abstract: Gender-based violence in politics (GBV-P) is undoubtedly a serious issue globally, and it remains both under-researched and under-addressed. This interview seeks to shed further light on the issue and contribute to greater awareness by engaging with the work and insights of Professor Tracey Raney, a leading scholar on GBV-P. Drawing from her extensive research, including her 2024 co-edited book *Gender-Based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*, the discussion draws attention to this serious threat to democracy. The interview offers readers an opportunity to understand the motive, forms, and impacts of gender-based violence (GBV) in political spaces. It also emphasizes that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to addressing this issue; rather, effective responses must be context-specific and attentive to the different political levels and lived experiences of those affected. Also in this conversation, Professor Raney discusses the nature and prevalence of GBV in Canadian politics, as well as how intersecting identities—particularly gender, race, and sexual orientation—shape the forms of violence experienced by women and gender-diverse political actors. She also reflects on the role of social media and mainstream media in these harmful gendered narratives, as well as examining the existing policy responses to GBV-P and their gaps. Finally, the interview reveals the resilience and agency of women navigating political spaces despite these challenges, while emphasizing that there is still much work to do in order to fully understand and address GBV-P. Professor Raney calls for collective action and decolonial, intersectional strategies to meaningfully confront this issue. Readers can expect a critical and engaging exploration of GBV-P and the possible pathways toward change.

Keywords: Canadian politics; gender-based violence; women’s political participation

Résumé : La violence fondée sur le genre en politique (VFG-P) constitue indéniablement un grave problème à l’échelle mondiale et demeure un phénomène à la fois peu étudié et insuffisamment pris en compte. Cette entrevue vise à approfondir la compréhension de cette question et à contribuer à une meilleure sensibilisation en s’intéressant aux travaux et aux réflexions de la professeure Tracey Raney, chercheuse de premier plan dans le domaine de la VFG-P. S’appuyant sur ses nombreuses recherches, notamment sur son ouvrage codirigé en 2024, *Gender-Based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*, la discussion attire l’attention sur cette grave menace pour la démocratie. L’entrevue permet aux lecteur·trice·s de mieux comprendre les motivations, les formes et les répercussions de la violence fondée sur le genre (VFG) dans les espaces politiques. Elle souligne également qu’il n’existe pas de solution universelle pour s’attaquer à ce problème; les interventions efficaces doivent plutôt être adaptées au contexte et tenir compte des différents paliers politiques ainsi que des expériences vécues des personnes touchées. Au cours de cette conversation, la professeure Raney aborde également la nature et la prévalence de la VFG dans la politique canadienne, ainsi que la manière dont les identités intersectionnelles, notamment le genre, la race et l’orientation sexuelle, façonnent les formes de violence vécues par les femmes et les personnes de diverses identités de genre qui œuvrent en politique. Elle réfléchit également au rôle des médias sociaux et des médias traditionnels dans la diffusion de ces récits genrés préjudiciables, tout en examinant les mesures prises actuellement pour lutter contre la VFG-P et leurs lacunes. Enfin, l’entrevue met en lumière la résilience et la capacité d’agir des femmes qui évoluent dans les espaces politiques malgré ces difficultés. Elle souligne notamment qu’il reste encore beaucoup à faire pour comprendre pleinement la VFG-P et y remédier. La professeure Raney appelle à une action collective et à des stratégies décoloniales et intersectionnelles afin de s’attaquer véritablement à cette question. Les lecteur·trice·s peuvent s’attendre à une analyse critique et stimulante de la VFG-P ainsi que des pistes possibles de changement.

Mots clés : politique canadienne; violence fondée sur le genre; participation politique des femmes

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Tracey Raney (she/her) is Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration, and a member of the Yeates School of Graduate Studies, at Toronto Metropolitan University. She previously served as the Graduate Program Director of the MA in Public Policy and Administration. In addition to holding a PhD in Political Science from the University of Calgary, she holds a master's degree in Canadian Studies (with a specialization in Women's Studies) from Carleton University and a bachelor's degree in Political Studies from Queen's University. Dr. Raney's broad research interests are in the areas of Canadian politics and women and politics. Her work focuses mainly on questions of identity, representation and leadership on topics including Canadian national identity, sub-national political identities in Canada, women's political representation (Canada and Ontario), gender-based violence in politics, and sexual misconduct in legislatures. Dr. Raney co-teaches the Women in the House program with Peggy Nash, Senior Advisor to the Dean of Arts. The Women in the House program is an interdisciplinary, experiential-learning course available to students who identify as women from across the university.

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Adebola Esther Osegboun: Could you tell us about your recent research on gender-based violence in politics (GBV-P)?

Tracey Raney: My research seeks to examine GBV-P in order to provide evidence-based solutions on how to address it. In 2024, I co-edited a volume with Cheryl Collier (University of Windsor) on this topic, *Gender-based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era*. The goal of this book is to draw attention to this serious threat to democracy and to offer new concepts and measures in the study of this problem. In the book, we define GBV-P as “harmful actions that are directed at an individual because of their gender, gender expression, gender identity, or perceived gender and which are designed to discourage or restrict them from being active in informal (e.g., movement, advocacy, online) or formal (e.g., elections, political parties, legislatures) political spaces” (Raney and Collier 2024, 7).

Across all the chapters, the authors in the volume tackle this issue in different spaces, including on social media; in traditional media coverage and political cartoons; in municipal, provincial, and federal politics; and in Indigenous political spaces. Each chapter makes the case for an intersectional approach to understanding violence and harassment in the political sphere.

Our hope is that this book opens the door to deeper explorations of how gender, gender identity and expression, race, religion, sexual orientation, and other axes of marginalization all impact experiences of violence in the political sphere. There isn't a “one size fits all” solution to address it, and we need multiple strategies to tackle it. We also wanted the book to be read by a wide audience, including academics, students, decision-makers, policymakers, women's movement activists and members of the public. The last chapter in the book, for example, includes practical solutions that emerge from the research conducted by the authors in the book.

While I was conducting research for this book project, a number of survivors came forward to the mainstream media to share their experiences of violence in municipal politics in my home province of Ontario.¹ In one of the more egre-

gious cases, Ottawa's municipal Integrity Commissioner found that over multiple years, one of the city's longest serving city councillors had harassed and bullied a number of women staff members, yet he was able to remain in his seat. At that time, most of my research had focused on the House of Commons, the Senate, or in the provinces, but I hadn't yet considered the municipal level of government. What I learned from hearing about these women's experiences is that solutions that might work in federal or provincial politics might not fit at the municipal level. As "creatures" of the provinces, municipalities have different ethical frameworks and in most municipalities across the country, political parties don't exist. Given the lack of research on gendered violence in Canadian municipal politics, I initiated a new research agenda that delves into this issue with recently co-authored, open-access publications on public opinion of councillor-perpetrated sexual violence and on policy solutions to address this problem in Ontario's municipalities.

Currently, I am working on a project with Toronto Metropolitan University Politics and Governance student Parmida Khanchi, where we are engaged in a cross-jurisdictional analysis of how other provinces have tackled violence and harassment in city halls across the country. In a separate yet related program of research, I'm writing a book that examines how legislative workplaces can be made more inclusive in Canada. Once published, this book will be part of a series that addresses issues related to political leadership and trust in Canada.

AEO: What is the nature and prevalence of GBV in Canadian politics?

TR: GBV can take different forms. In her book, *Violence Against Women in Politics*, Mona Lena Krook identifies different types of violence designed to subjugate women political actors because of their gender and render them invisible. These include physical (e.g. shoving, beating, slapping, killing), psychological (e.g., death threats, rape threats, intimidation, bullying, threats against family members), sexual (e.g. non-consensual touching or kissing, groping, rape, attempted rape), economic (e.g. property destruction, theft, threats to terminate employment or to withdraw financial support), and semiotic or "symbolic" (e.g. using words, images, or body language) (Krook 2020).

In Canada, GBV-P is directed at any actor who participates in the political sphere, including politicians, political and legislative staffers, party officials and volunteers, women's movement actors, human rights advocates, and political journalists. Women with intersecting identities often experience the most harassment and violence, particularly those who are Indigenous, Black, or racially minoritized. This violence takes the form of groping, sexual harassment and assault, as well as sexist, racist, and homophobic threats and non-consensual image-based sexual violence online. Indigenous women leaders face these harms with particular intensity. To provide one example, in the fall of 2025 two First Nations women cabinet ministers, Nahanni Fontaine and Bernadette Smith, were targeted by multiple acts of arson and vandalism at their campaign offices. Although police have not publicly identified a motive, the fact that both women were the first Indigenous women appointed to Manitoba's cabinet strongly suggests that the attacks were not random. Instead, they point to the intersecting dynamics of misogyny and anti-Indigenous racism that continue to shape political life in Canada. These recent examples are reminders of how embedded colonial structures have long worked to silence, punish, and exclude Indigenous women from positions of power and how they continue to operate today.

AEO: Can you tell us how gender influences the forms of violence women are exposed to? And, in your view, which forms of GBV most significantly harm women's political participation?

TR: Research by Bardall et al. (2020) lays out a useful framework to understand how and when political violence is gendered. They suggest that violence can be gendered in its *motive* (when perpetrators use violence to preserve patriarchal control in politics), in its *form* (when gender roles and tropes differentially shape men's and women's experiences of violence) and in its *impact* (the subjective meaning-making processes that occur as different audiences react to political violence). This framework allows us to determine when violence is being directed at a woman political actor versus violence that is directed at a political actor *due to their gender, gender identity or gendered expression*.

All forms of GBV-P harm women's political participation and more broadly, the democratic process. When violence is directed at political actors because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation, its purpose is to silence their voice and punish them for encroaching on a space where they do not belong, with the ultimate goal of pushing them out of positions of power. When gendered violence occurs in public spaces, whether at community events or on social media, it sends a broader message about who is considered acceptable in politics. Such violence acts as a tool to reinforce politics as a space dominated by hegemonic masculinity by suggesting that anyone who challenges the traditional image of politics as the domain of white, cisgender, heterosexual men risks facing similar attacks if they seek to participate or remain in political life.

AEO: In today's digital age, social media plays a significant role in circulating GBV in political spaces. What can you say about this?

TR: Social media plays a central role in how gendered political violence is produced and circulated. When online violence is directed at women political leaders, it impacts not only its immediate target, but also the staff who often oversee politicians' social media accounts, their family members who see it, and all of their followers. The practice of rage-farming, where online creators intentionally create and post inflammatory and/or discriminatory content in order to maximize viewer engagement, is one example of alarming activity online. A clear example of this behaviour occurred in 2022, when former Minister Chrystia Freeland was verbally accosted by a man while entering a small elevator with her all-woman staff team. This incident was filmed and subsequently shared across multiple social media platforms, reaching a wide audience. While the misogynistic attack targeted Freeland personally, its purpose was to signal to the public that Minister Freeland isn't "fit" for office, thereby generating more clicks from the accoster's audience in the process. The danger of rage-baiting is that, as misogyny becomes more normalized, those who wish to spread hate online must work harder and harder to capture the attention they crave.

The constant threat of online violence has led some women politicians to self-censor by limiting how they engage with the public on social media or to withdraw from these platforms entirely. When political actors are forced to censor themselves or withdraw from social media, it constitutes a form of political exclusion and another barrier to inclusive, equitable democratic politics. It also diminishes the wider democratic process as there are fewer voices, interests, and issues being circulated in the virtual public square.

Unfortunately, many of the most popular social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and X) lack adequate policies and safeguards to prevent the spread of extremist content, misogyny, and misogynoir. Decision-makers urgently need to regulate these platforms to ensure that free expression is protected for everyone and not just for those who use it to promote hatred. Allowing hate to circulate unchecked online poses a serious threat to social cohesion and to the health of democratic societies. The ongoing European Union, French and British-led investigations into Grok (X's AI tool) and its production of sexualized images and videos of women and children demonstrates how government actors can play a role in responding to this global problem. Canadian decision-makers need to act similarly to force social media companies to better safeguard their sites from widespread hate and discrimination. Stronger regulations and more transparency and accountability regarding the use of algorithms and enforceable codes of conduct are urgently needed.

AEO: What are your thoughts about the Canadian mainstream media reports? Do they promote, challenge or ignore incidents of violence against women?

TR: A significant body of research (Wagner & Everitt 2019) demonstrates how traditional news media coverage reinforces hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative stereotypes of leaders in Canada. Gendered mediation frames often focus on the appearance, personality, and personal lives of women leaders rather than on their policies, while signalling that traditionally-coded masculine traits like dominance and competition are indicators of strong leadership. Media coverage of political candidates that reproduces these gendered mediation frames contributes to the marginalization of women and gender-diverse individuals, as it narrows acceptable models of leadership and normalizes hostility against those who fall outside of the traditional norm. At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that several

women journalists have played an important role in exposing sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia in Canadian politics. Many of the stories that document these forms of discrimination in politics have been written by women, some of whom are themselves subjected to racist and misogynistic attacks (The Coalition for Women in Journalism 2022). Diverse representation on news media editorial boards is crucial to telling the real stories of how women leaders are being treated and their strategies in responding to it.

AEO: What policy measures or laws currently exist in Canada to respond to GBV-P? In your view, what gaps persist?

TR: I'd like to start with some of the positive measures that have been taken first, as this is helpful for other jurisdictions (both in Canada and elsewhere) to replicate. One of the strengths of existing policies and rules that seek to address this problem is on the prevention-side of the ledger. The House of Commons, the Senate of Canada, and some of the provincial legislatures all require elected officials and staffers to attend mandatory training on violence and harassment. In 2015, the House of Commons appended a new code of conduct to its standing orders. The Code's purpose is to create an environment in the House that is free of sexual harassment. To achieve this purpose, upon election all MPs are required, in writing, to pledge their commitment to contribute to a sexual harassment-free work environment. Additionally, some legislatures across the country, including the House of Commons, have policies in place that would allow for an independent investigation to take place into an allegation of sexual harassment. These are all positive developments.

At the same time, there are many gaps and loopholes in existing policies. Unlike in the United Kingdom where there is an independent panel that reviews all cases of MP bullying, harassment, and sexual misconduct to determine a penalty, in the Canadian House of Commons the decision to sanction a politician who has engaged in sexual harassment is left to a panel of fellow politicians. Moreover, given the current composition of the House of Commons which is comprised of 70% men (most of whom are white), decisions about how and whether to sanction a politician who has engaged in sexual harassment are most likely going to fall to committees comprised of largely white men. The existing rules also don't address the underlying causes of such violence, which is the result of hegemonic masculinity and colonial legacies that preserve the power of white, cisgender men.

Another gap is the lack of specific protections for politicians from harassment or threats, whether online or in public spaces. While Canada's Criminal Code provides some safeguards against criminal harassment for members of the public, there is no standalone law explicitly addressing harassment or violence targeting women politicians. Some Latin American countries, including Bolivia and Mexico, have pioneered such legal measures. In Canada, Quebec is a notable exception: in 2024, the province passed a law imposing fines of up to \$1,500 for anyone who intimidates or harasses a politician and allowing officials to seek injunctions against citizens who issue threats against them. The legislation followed a survey showing that three-quarters of elected municipal officials in Quebec had experienced harassment or intimidation. This law represents an important first step in protecting politicians, and policymakers in other jurisdictions should seriously consider adopting similar measures.

AEO: Even in the face of these various forms of violence, a lot of women continue to engage in politics. What forms of agency have you observed that women use to navigate these challenges?

TR: This is an important question, as it highlights the issue of resilience in the face of violence. One way to address GBV-P is for women to support other women leaders through formal and informal networks. For example, the Halton Elected Representatives (H.E.R) group (comprised of women politicians at the local, provincial, and federal levels from the same region) created a pledge to call out and prevent harassment of women in government. At the federal level, the Canadian Association of Feminist Parliamentarians launched a similar pledge to promote greater civility in politics. These networks demonstrate how women are organizing across party lines to raise awareness of harassment and to protect one another from hostility and toxicity.

Another demonstration of women's resilience in the face of gendered violence is to simply refuse to leave politics. When Manitoba Ministers Fontaine and Smith's constituency offices were targeted by vandalism, they stated that

they would not be pushed out of public office (Hoye 2025). Their courage in the face of anti-Indigenous, gendered violence helps to draw attention to the problem and to demonstrate that these acts of intimidation won't work. Beyond Canada, we are also seeing women who have experienced gendered violence pursue changes through public policy and law. After Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum was publicly groped late last year, the Secretary of Women, Citlalli Hernández, presented a presidential plan intended to combat violence against women (Presidencia de la República 2025). This plan includes easier pathways to report sexual violence and a public awareness campaign intended to prevent violence against women. Using the judicial system, another prominent example is Brigitte Macron's (the French President's wife) cyber-bullying lawsuit which was filed against multiple defendants who were found guilty of spreading false and transphobic claims about her gender and sexuality (Armstrong & Schofield 2026). Other women have used their voice to draw attention to GBV-P. After being on the receiving end of sexist language from a Republican colleague in 2020, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez delivered a powerful speech on the floor of the House of Representatives where she called out the sexist culture of politics (Associated Press 2020). Eight years earlier, former Prime Minister of Australia Julia Gillard delivered a speech heard around the world on the misogyny she faced being a woman politician (BBC 2022). These women leaders are using their own platforms to raise awareness about this issue.

AEO: It is safe to say that to fully explain and address GBV-P, multiple approaches are needed. What do you think are some of the approaches to best address the problem of GBV in the political space?

TR: There is still much work to do to fully understand and address GBV-P. A crucial step is for researchers and advocates to adopt decolonial approaches that specifically address the lateral violence experienced by Indigenous women leaders. Scholars such as Rebecca Major and Cynthia Stirbys have begun this work, outlining important measures that must be taken (Major and Stirbys 2024). Their work indicates how solutions must be grounded in Indigenous feminist frameworks, recognizing that Indigenous women face compounded violence as members of two historically subordinate groups, based on gender and race. The systemic targeting of Indigenous women continues to shape their experiences in predominantly non-Indigenous political spaces today. Implementing anti-racist policies across institutions, fulfilling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, and acting on the recommendations of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Inquiry are critical steps.

Those who are in power have a responsibility to ensure that online platforms and tools do not perpetuate group-based hate. We also need a strong and vibrant women's movement to prevent the further normalization of violence and hatred toward women. Women's organizations across Canada play a vital role in combating the rampant misogyny in the manosphere, which includes popular podcasts and social media channels viewed by millions globally.

Finally, it is important to encourage people from marginalized communities to run for office: vote for them, contribute time or money to their campaigns, or, ideally, consider running for public office yourself.

Endnotes

1. The use of the term "survivor" is subjective and varies according to how people who are targeted by gendered violence prefer to identify themselves in relation to their experiences. While some people use "survivor," others prefer the terms "victim" or "victim/survivor." [where is this in the text?]

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