

**Violence against Women in Politics:  
A Rising Threat to Democracy Worldwide**

Mona Lena Krook

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science

Rutgers University

89 George Street

New Brunswick, NJ 08901

U.S.A.

[m.l.krook@rutgers.edu](mailto:m.l.krook@rutgers.edu)

**Abstract:** Reports of attacks, intimidation, and harassment have grown as women have become more politically engaged around the world in recent years. Often dismissed as the ‘cost of doing politics,’ such violence is increasingly recognized as a threat to democracy, with implications not only for female political actors, but also for citizens as a whole. Drawing on data and testimonies from all over the globe, as well as academic research on gendered and political violence, this essay maps the contours of this phenomenon and outlines emerging solutions.

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Women have made significant inroads into political life around the globe in recent years, doubling their presence in national parliaments, becoming more visible as social and political activists, and gaining recognition as a key and influential voting demographic.<sup>1</sup> Having more women in politics has been viewed in largely positive terms, as leading to attention to a wider range of policy issues, including those beneficial to women; inspiring greater interest and engagement in politics among women as a group, particularly young women; and eroding historical associations between men and politics, generating broader transformations in gender roles.<sup>2</sup> Yet a growing number of sources worldwide report physical attacks, intimidation, and harassment directed at female politicians, activists, and voters. Reflecting attempts to restrict women's policy contributions, deter women's electoral participation, and reinforce prevailing gender norms, such acts pose a serious threat to democracy and, in turn, question the progress that has been made globally in terms of incorporating women as political actors.

Efforts to impede women's political participation are not new. Many societies around the world have long associated men with the 'public sphere' of politics and the economy and women with the 'private sphere' of home and family. Women are thus often regarded as interlopers in the 'male' space of politics, giving rise to various forms of hostility towards female leaders.<sup>3</sup> In the 1910s, American and British suffrage campaigners were attacked by mobs, imprisoned, and even force-fed for demanding women's right to vote. In the 1950s, rivals of Coya Knutson, a Congresswoman from Minnesota, wrote and circulated a letter from her estranged husband, stating that he was "sick and tired of having [her] run around with other men all the time" and urging her to "come home."<sup>4</sup> Despite its false claims, the letter had a devastating impact, causing her to lose her seat. In 1960, three sisters – Patria, Minerva, and

María Teresa Mirabal –were assassinated in the Dominican Republic for their political activities against the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. In their honor, in 1999 the United Nations designated November 25 as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.<sup>5</sup>

For some female politicians, dealing with sexism in the political world is simply ‘the cost of doing politics.’ When Hillary Clinton launched an initiative in 2014 to support women seeking public roles, her advice to women in politics was to “grow skin like a rhinoceros.” Appearing on a television program to discuss online hate speech directed at her, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg commented that “this kind of abuse isn’t a big deal... As a female politician you get used to being judged on your appearance and everything else, so you become thick-skinned.” However, in a biography published after she left office, former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard explained that she had avoided speaking out against the misogynistic treatment she faced, fearing that charges that she was “hysterical” or “not coping” might only serve to justify claims that women did not belong in politics. “There wasn’t a safe place to go talk about it,” observed former Canadian Deputy Prime Minister, Sheila Copps, in 2014, addressing why she did not report being sexually assaulted by a male provincial parliament colleague in 1980.<sup>6</sup>

This narrative has begun to change as a growing number of actors around the world have started to document diverse – often creative and nefarious – forms of resistance to women’s political participation. Introducing new terms like ‘political violence and harassment,’ ‘violence against women in elections,’ and ‘violence against women in politics,’ they note that – while violence in all its forms is unacceptable – female politicians, activists, and voters face difficulties their male counterparts do not when seeking to take part in public life, instigated by male and female opponents of women’s participation. In the name of traditional gender norms,

women's political campaigns may be sabotaged by family members and party colleagues, feminist activists may be the targets of relentless on-line bullying and ridicule from often-anonymous sources, and female citizens may be actively prevented from voting or coerced to vote in a particular way by religious or traditional leaders or their own husbands. Restricting their participation *as women* means that the scope of such acts expand beyond the targeted individuals, aiming to send a broader message to women – and to society – that *women as a group* should not participate in politics.

Efforts to harm, intimidate, and harass women should, therefore, be recognized as a serious threat and affront to democracy, rather than an unfortunate outcome of 'politics as usual.' Attempting to stop women as a group from participating in politics seeks to negate the political rights of no less than half the world's population. Sabotaging the political campaigns of female candidates, or inhibiting female office-holders from fulfilling their duties, threatens the integrity of the electoral process, violating citizens' rights to vote for their preferred candidates and see democratic choices respected. Such actions, in turn, deprive citizens of benefits stemming from the inclusion of women's perspectives in political debates and decision-making in matters affecting society as a whole. Recognizing and combatting this phenomenon is thus an emerging global priority, essential for ensuring equal opportunities for women and men to participate in politics, as well as for developing robust democratic institutions and practices.

### **Identifying the Problem**

Violence against women in politics is a global problem, with elected women, journalists, judges, academics, activists, and practitioners coming together in recent years to illuminate

women's experiences with assault, intimidation, and harassment at all stages of the political process. The result has been a series of normative declarations, action plans, training programs, and studies at the global, regional, and national levels. Various United Nations (UN) institutions have recognized this problem, with the General Assembly passing a resolution in 2011 on zero tolerance for violence against female candidates and elected officials; a Human Rights Council working group noting in 2013 that "stigmatization, harassment and outright attacks have been used to silence and discredit women who are outspoken as leaders, community workers, human rights defenders, and politicians"; and UN Women developing indicators to measure violence against women in elections. Another global institution, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), is currently preparing an issue brief on violence against women in parliament, based on surveys and interviews with male and female parliamentarians, as well as a draft resolution to be put to a vote at the 135<sup>th</sup> IPU Assembly in Geneva in October 2016.

Some regional organizations, like the Inter-American Commission on Women and Organization of American States, have been very active in these discussions,<sup>7</sup> along with practitioner organizations— like International IDEA and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) – with offices in various countries around the world. The National Democratic Institute (NDI), for example, developed a 'Votes without Violence' toolkit to support citizen observers in tackling election-related violence against women. To inspire greater cross-regional dialogue among those working on this issue, NDI took the further step of convening an event in New York in March 2016 to raise awareness of violence faced by politically active women. Featuring testimonies and perspectives from female politicians, activists, and voters from all parts of the world, the event culminated in the launch of a global

call to action, #NotTheCost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics, identifying steps that actors across different sectors might take to end violence against women in politics.<sup>8</sup>

Despite varied terminology and attention to distinct sets of politically active women, most definitions highlight the same three elements: (1) aggressive acts toward female political actors, faced largely or only by women; (2) because they are women, often using gendered means of attack; (3) in order to deter their participation, as a way to preserve traditional gender roles and undermine democratic institutions. Importantly, these debates do not limit ‘violence’ to physical manifestations, although ‘harassment,’ ‘intimidation,’ ‘abuse,’ and ‘discrimination’ have sometimes been introduced to draw attention to non-physical dimensions of violence. An inclusive definition is consistent with research and activism on gender-based violence, which recognizes the need to be sensitive to cross-cultural and cross-national variations to capture the full spectrum of acts employing aggression and coercion to deny equal rights to women.<sup>9</sup>

Variations in social and political contexts, more specifically, may affect the content and prevalence of acts to deter women’s political participation. As with violence against women more generally, arguments about ‘culture’ are often mobilized to justify harms perpetrated against women. In one Pakistani province, for example, none of the 50,000 eligible female voters cast a vote in the 2015 elections. While a leader of the governing Islamist party stated that women had “merely chosen to respect local traditions by not voting,” various reports indicated that mosques had broadcast warnings to women and that polling stations were guarded by “baton-wielding men” who blocked women who tried to vote.<sup>10</sup> In Mexico and Sierra Leone, women have been barred from running, or disqualified after winning, in local elections on the grounds that their participation violated local customs and traditions.

Another culture-based resource is to question the sexual identity or morality of politically active women. Accusations that a woman is a bad wife, mother, or daughter – or a lesbian – may be spread through rumors or posted online in an attempt to defame women, harming not only their political prospects but also their personal lives. Former British member of parliament (MP), Naz Shah, recounted that opponents circulated doctored photos of her in the largely Muslim community she represented, asking “do you want your daughters to be like her?” Such tactics may devastate women’s reputations in communities where a woman’s ‘honor’ is seen as an extension of her family or where families share a dense network of social ties. Online sexism and misogyny, moreover, may discourage women who view potential social media abuse and character assassination as a “hurdle too far,” in the words of a young female candidate in Scotland.<sup>11</sup>

Favored forms of violence, in turn, may be related to variations in state capacity. It may be ‘easier’ to perpetrate acts of physical violence, for example, in countries where violence is routine and there is widespread impunity for committing crimes. Perpetrators can therefore conceal these acts under the problem of ‘general insecurity,’ while also knowing that they are unlikely to be punished for their actions. Conversely, in countries in which such forms of violence are highly condemned and the state has the means to punish perpetrators, non-physical forms of violence may be preferred, as they can achieve the desired effects while at the same time being more difficult to prove. Ironically, high levels of state capacity and respect for the rule of law may even aid perpetrators in the form of stronger guarantees of the right to free speech, which might be mobilized to permit and defend these acts. A narrow definition of

'violence' thus risks ignoring certain behaviors, although they may operate in analogous ways to exclude women from political life.

### **Categorizing the Problem**

Emerging global debates have drawn on concepts in national legislation, international declarations, and research on gender-based violence to identify five forms of violence against politically active women: physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and symbolic. In addition to capturing culturally- and context-specific manifestations of resistance to women's participation, mapping women's experiences in particular instances strengthens the case for considering them as part of the same 'field' of behaviors. Individual acts may fall into multiple categories; some incidents may involve several of these acts simultaneously; and, if targets do not respond to one form of violence, perpetrators may escalate their attacks using other types.

*Physical violence* involves bodily injuries inflicted on female political actors and/or their family members. This may include assassination, kidnapping, beating, and domestic abuse. In early 2016, Gisela Mota was gunned down in her home in Mexico less than one day after being sworn in as her town's first female mayor. In Kenya, Asha Ali, a women's rights activist, was severely beaten in 2007 in front of her children and elderly mother by three men who told her not to stand as a candidate. The 2004 elections in Afghanistan included intimidating women so that they would not register to vote, bombing a bus carrying female electoral workers, and issuing threats against female polling stations.

*Sexual violence* comprises sexual acts and attempts at sexual acts by coercion, including unwelcome sexual comments or advances. This includes sexual harassment, rape, and sexual



exploitation. Sexual harassment allegations led to the expulsion of Mbulelo Goniwe, chief whip for the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party in South Africa in 2006; the dismissal of two male Liberal MPs in Canada in 2014; and the resignation of the interior minister, Silvan Shalom, in Israel in 2015. In early 2016, a 14-year-old girl was kidnapped from her bed late at night and raped as revenge for her mother's victory in local elections in India. In Sudan, female human rights defenders are often sexually assaulted and told that they would be raped again if they continued their activities. In Tanzania, female judges and activists have exposed widespread practices of 'sextortion,' or forcing women to perform sexual favors, as a condition for women to advance in the public service and political parties.

*Psychological violence* entails hostile behavior and abuse intended to cause emotional damage. Death and rape threats, stalking, character assassination, and social boycotts are all examples. Susana Villarán, the first female mayor of Lima, Peru, faced repeated, unfounded efforts to disrupt her work as soon as she assumed office, culminating in an historic – yet unsuccessful – 'recall' referendum in 2013. In early 2016, Muslim Women's Network UK alleged that Muslim male local councilors had systematically sabotaged female candidates by engaging in smear tactics to damage their reputations and by intimidating their family members. In Uganda, a female opposition activist was stripped naked by police at a party rally in 2015, leaving her shocked and humiliated in front of male colleagues. That same year, nearly 50 women in Zanzibar were divorced by their husbands for voting, while in Bangladesh, men reportedly confiscated their wives' identity cards and went with them to the polls.

*Economic violence* refers to degradation and coercion by controlling access to economic resources. Campaign finance patterns indicate that parties in Brazil systematically denied

women – but not men – the funding necessary to wage successful campaigns.<sup>12</sup> Islamic fundamentalists in Libya and Pakistan tore down posters containing female – but not male – candidates’ photos. Local officials in Bolivian municipalities denied female office-holders their salaries and expense claims, and in Costa Rica, officials refused elected women – including mayors – offices and telephones, in both cases providing these items to their male colleagues. In Mexico, party officers deprived female party activists of state-provided funds they were entitled to by law to support women’s leadership development. In Guatemala, politicians threatened women with loss of social benefits if they did not register with a party or pledge to vote for a certain candidate.

*Symbolic violence* encompasses abuse and aggression operating at the level of symbols and portrayals, seeking at a very fundamental level to deny the political competence of women. Highly sexualized images of female politicians are found easily via a Google search.<sup>13</sup> Female MPs in Afghanistan, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Japan were silenced, their microphones cut off and speeches interrupted by sexist heckling. In Saudi Arabia, newly elected female councilors were ordered to sit in separate rooms from their male colleagues.<sup>14</sup> In Sudan, security officers forced female human rights defenders to undress, photographed them, and then threatened to use the photos against them. A woman in Haiti who questioned President Michel Martelly at a party rally was told to “go get a man and go into the bushes.” In the United States, the Bernie Sanders campaign felt compelled in early 2016 to condemn the online misogyny and vitriol of some of his young male followers (the so-called “Bernie Bros”) towards female supporters of Hillary Clinton, an issue that has been continually raised over the course of his campaign.

## **A Problem for Democracy**

Despite these many examples, violence against women in politics remains a largely hidden problem. As a result, many women do not recognize what has happened to them as a form of violence. After revealing sexist remarks from her male colleagues in the U.S. Senate, for instance, Kirsten Gillibrand stated that she took no offense because they were “made by men who were well into their 60s, 70s or 80s [who] had no clue that those are inappropriate things to say to a pregnant woman or a woman who just had a baby or to women in general.” Aurore Bergé, a local politician in France, however, captures the difficulty in knowing how to respond to sexist advances: “You are staggered. You are blocked. Should you slap him? Everyone would look at you. You don’t laugh? Clearly you were not meant for a life in politics. And anyway, wasn’t it funny?” As a result, the main response of many women is to stay quiet, even when they are sure the behavior in question is unacceptable: as former French politician Monique Pelletier castigated herself on Twitter in May 2016, “Minister of women in 1979, I was harassed by a senator... shame on me for my silence!”<sup>15</sup> As she pointed out in a subsequent interview, power dynamics between men and women in parliaments and parties conspire to keep these behaviors hidden, treated as an unfortunate but common occurrence in backstage political life.

Dismissing violence as the ‘cost of doing politics’ is problematic for many reasons: it validates the nature of the current political system; places the onus on victims, not structures, to change; and perpetuates inequalities. Blaming the victim is a common approach in relation to violence against women, suggesting that a woman herself is ultimately responsible for acts perpetrated against her, stemming from what she wore, what she said, or what she did.<sup>16</sup> At a suffrage parade in Washington, DC, in 1913, for example, as a mob attacked and injured more

than 300 marchers, police officers did nothing, famously telling the women: “There would be nothing like this happen if you would stay at home.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, telling women they should ‘stay at home’ serves to reinforce the gendered public/private divide. Such warnings can have a chilling effect, as in Pakistan in 2007 when many women refrained or were discouraged from voting by village elders or their husbands after female party leader Benazir Bhutto was assassinated.

Teaching women coping strategies, moreover, does not solve the root of the problem. As Canadian MP Michelle Rempel observed in an editorial, “I shouldn’t have to mentor the young women on my staff with tips and tricks to combat sexism.” Rather, she suggests, men and women should work together to tackle sexism itself. In France, such an initiative emerged in May 2016, when over 500 politicians and activists, male and female, launched a petition calling for an end to impunity for sexual violence and harassment against women in politics, following a scandal surrounding the conduct of Deputy Speaker, Denis Baupin. The campaign’s editorial in *Liberation*, entitled “Let’s end the conspiracy of silence!” (*Levons l’omerta!*), notes the “difficulty in recognizing that this problem exists – even if, in lowered voices, it is known by everyone.”<sup>18</sup> Exposing such behaviors to critical scrutiny, as *not* the ‘cost of doing politics,’ can also correct the misperception that sexualizing women is an expression of sexual desire. Rather, it is a conscious strategy to put women ‘back in their place’ and reinforce male dominance.<sup>19</sup> As former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard remarked: “misogyny is often a go-to weapon when politicians are trying to make a point about something else.” Sexual innuendo, according to Turkish politician Meral Akşener, is nothing but a tactic to “dismiss women from politics.”<sup>20</sup>

Existing literature on political and electoral violence overlooks these dynamics, focusing on the rise of violent incidents between ethnic and communal groups around election times, or

alternatively, the use of violence to commit electoral fraud through vote buying, ballot rigging, and interfering with voter and candidate registration processes.<sup>21</sup> Yet violence against all actors is unacceptable and harms democracy at all stages of the political process. Remaining blind to gendered experiences renders invisible the fact, for example, that women may be targeted for rape and other forms of sexual violence, as occurred in election-related crises in 2007 and 2011 in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively. At the same time, acts and threats perpetrated against female candidates, activists, and voters *as women* cannot be subsumed under, or explained by, violence in politics more generally.

Violence in politics, in line with traditional definitions of political and electoral violence, occurs in public spaces and emanates from political opponents and, in some countries, criminal elements. At election time, the aim is to influence and, if necessary, to alter electoral outcomes. Between elections, a large share of politicians – upwards of 80% of MPs – experience intrusive or aggressive behaviors from the public. These may include physical attacks, threats, unwanted approaches, alarming behavior, being followed, loitering, property interference, spurious legal action, distribution of malicious materials, inappropriate letters or emails, inappropriate phone calls, or inappropriate social media contacts. Most of these acts, however, are committed by fixated loners, usually pursuing highly personal grievances and/or suffering mental illness.<sup>22</sup>

Violence against women in politics, in contrast, takes place in public *and* private spaces. In addition to political opponents and criminals, potential perpetrators include community and religious leaders, state security forces and police, and media and social media commentators. Many, if not the majority, of perpetrators are women's party colleagues and family members, as corroborated by a recent UN Women study on India, Pakistan, and Nepal.<sup>23</sup> In addition to

facing attacks in insecure environments, politically active women may thus face danger in spaces that are habitually safe for men: political assemblies, party meetings, their offices, and their homes. The drive to preserve traditional gender roles by preventing women *as women* from exercising their political rights means that – while violent acts may be experienced at a very personal level, even between a husband and wife – their implications are much broader, communicating the general message that *women as a group* should not participate in politics.

The fact that female politicians who speak and act from a feminist perspective appear more likely to be attacked further supports this interpretation, given that they challenge male dominance in multiple ways. In the one year since she assumed office, British MP Jess Phillips, a self-proclaimed feminist, has received numerous waves of rape and death threats, mainly via Twitter. In May 2016, she received in a single night over 600 tweets threatening rape after she joined other MPs in launching a campaign to end sexist bullying online. Former Texas state senator Wendy Davis – who famously staged an 11-hour filibuster in 2013 against sweeping abortion restrictions – similarly noted: “I have lots of bots<sup>24</sup> who follow me. I could literally say it’s a beautiful day in Texas and the responses I get on Twitter are ‘baby murderer.’”<sup>25</sup>

Awareness of this problem has grown as opportunities have expanded globally for women to stand and be elected as candidates, participate in social and political movements, and turn out to vote. The causal connection, however, is not clear, and at least three scenarios may explain why this phenomenon appears to be on the rise. More politically active women may simply mean that there are more female political actors to attack. Alternatively, women’s increased political voice and visibility may threaten those concerned with preserving the status quo, exacerbating tendencies towards violence as a means to forestall change. Or, greater

discussion of women's participation may be fostering greater consciousness of inequality in political life – in turn, casting new light on dynamics that have been occurring for many years.

Whatever the reason for this increased attention, both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that violence against politically active women is prevalent and has a devastating impact on democratic institutions and practices. In the 2010 elections in Afghanistan, women were the targets in 9 out of 10 threats against candidates. In Peru, studies by the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones revealed that nearly half of elected women in 2011 and more than one-quarter of female candidates in regional and local elections in 2014 experienced violence or harassment. A civil society group, also in Peru, found that 70% of mayors, councilors, and regional presidents had engaged in political harassment of women, most commonly when elected women tried to exercise oversight, ask information about expenses, and seek to fight corruption. IFES election violence data from Bangladesh, Burundi, Guyana, Guinea, Nepal, and Timor-Leste observed that female voters were four times more likely to be victims of electoral violence than male voters, with nearly three-quarters of these cases occurring in rural areas.<sup>26</sup>

Women who challenge multiple aspects of the status quo – younger women, as well as women from indigenous groups and racial minorities – appear to be particularly susceptible to attack. As Cheery Zahau, a 34-year-old candidate in Myanmar in 2015, remarked: “One thing about being young, single, and a woman is that I have to endure a lot of smears and attacks on my integrity.” In India, more than half of the respondents in a UN Women survey on violence against women in politics reported that lower caste women faced attacks from both upper and lower caste men. And Cécile Kyenge, the first black minister in Italy, had bananas thrown at her and faced comments from right-wing politicians that “she seems like a great housekeeper” but

“not a government minister.”<sup>27</sup> Together, these trends indicate that backlash towards women in politics is not limited to only a handful of women or individual perpetrators – and, moreover, may exacerbate other forms of inequality, further reducing prospects for democratic inclusion.

For female politicians, experimental evidence suggests that sexist comments and the sexual objectification of women can have a sizeable, if not devastating, impact on women’s electoral fortunes. A survey of 800 likely voters in the U.S. in 2010 found that even very mild sexist language had an impact on voters’ likelihood to vote for a female candidate. In another study, priming respondents to focus on Sarah Palin’s appearance led to reduced intentions to vote for the McCain-Palin ticket in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections. The likely reason is, as former Texas state senator Wendy Davis observed in relation to her experiences: “photoshops of me in very suggestive sexual positions were inviting people to view me as a sexual being and not someone who had a lot to offer in terms of my policies.”<sup>28</sup>

Further, sexist hostility and intimidation can drive female politicians to step down from their posts or decline to stand for reelection. One-third of female local politicians in Sweden said they considered giving up their positions as a result of such incidents, while 48% of the women leaving office in Bolivia in 2010 stated they had been victims of political harassment and violence. Young women, in turn, appear to internalize these lessons in ways that reduce their own political ambitions. In Australia, 60% of women aged 18 to 21 and 80% of women over 31 said they were less likely to run for office after seeing how negatively the female prime minister was treated. Nearly all participants in a program for aspiring women leaders in the UK stated that they had witnessed sexist abuse of female politicians online, and over 75% said it was a concern weighing on their decision to pursue a role in public life.<sup>29</sup>



Violence towards female activists and voters can also depress women's willingness and ability to participate in political life. Sexual abuse of female human rights defenders in Sudan can disparage their reputations in ways that cause lasting personal and professional harm. Many end up abandoning their activism or going into exile. One woman described the personal cost as "feeling bereft of 'the momentum of working on issues that became part of my life.'" Women who do not leave the country may be beaten or detained by their families at home for months. In the words of one activist: "[The security forces] do not need to detain us anymore, the family members can do their jobs for them."<sup>30</sup> The disfranchisement of female voters, who have been compelled to stay home instead of going to the polls in Pakistan and Afghanistan, in turn casts doubt on the legitimacy of elections.

The use of violence to deter women's political participation, finally, constitutes a breach of international commitments to protect human rights and end discrimination against women. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that (1) everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (2) everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his or her country; and (3) the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government... expressed in periodic and genuine elections...by universal and equal suffrage. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) pledges to remove "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex" impairing or nullifying the equal enjoyment or exercise by women and men of "fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." Beyond its practical implications, violence against politically active women thus also has important normative dimensions. Rather than

excusing the political realm from scrutiny, its critical reevaluation is a necessary prerequisite for defending democracy, human rights, and equality for all citizens.

### **From Problem to Solutions**

These debates highlight ongoing barriers to women’s political empowerment. Global discussions have produced a host of different solutions – from consciousness-raising efforts to party rule changes to legislative reforms – engaging actors at all levels of political life. The crucial first step is to break what St. Lucia MP Gale Rigobert calls the “violence of silence,” the fear of speaking up about violence against women in politics because it is still dismissed as simply the ‘cost of doing politics.’ Daring to speak out opens the way for frank discussion of ways in which politics, not women, should change to be more inclusive. Calling out sexist attacks can also neutralize the damage caused by these remarks, leveling the playing field for women and men and returning the focus to substantive political issues.<sup>31</sup>

Opinion pieces published in high-profile media outlets provide one means for female politicians to raise awareness. On International Women’s Day in 2016, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote a powerful article in advance of the #NotTheCost campaign launch, asserting that “[w]hen a woman participates in politics, she should be putting her hopes and dreams for the future on the line, not her dignity and not her life.” In March 2016, women in the Italian Parliamentary Committee on Women, Law, and Equal Opportunities published a call in *La Repubblica*, saying “enough to sexist insults towards women in politics” and proposing a moratorium on inappropriate language of a sexist nature. After facing a misogynistic backlash following a vote on building a new sports arena, female city council members in Seattle wrote

that such rhetoric “communicate[d] a dangerous message,” but they jointly proclaimed in May 2016: “We will not be silenced with threats, not today, not tomorrow, and not ever.”<sup>32</sup>

Political parties can also take a number of concrete steps to tackle this problem. One is by issuing declarations of principle and revising internal party regulations to introduce a zero tolerance policy for perpetrators of sexual violence and harassment of women in politics. The ANC in South Africa and Liberal Party in Canada have done this, in effect, by dismissing leaders – in one case, the party’s chief whip, and in the other, two male MPs – who engaged in sexual harassment. Other initiatives include rules in the British Labour Party against sexism, racism, and bullying in party meetings, and brochures and handbooks produced and distributed by women’s party organizations in Norway and Sweden offering strategies for recognizing and counteracting ‘domination techniques’ employed against women in politics. International party federations can play a leading role. Juli Minoves, president of Liberal International (LI) – who will deliver a statement at the June 2016 session of the UN’s Human Rights Council – has pledged to call on Liberal MPs around the world to speak up on this issue and endorse the #NotTheCost global call to action. LI will also incorporate a call to end violence against women in politics in its manifesto.

The problem of violence against women in politics, however, is not limited to individual parties. Recognizing that resistance can be found across the ideological spectrum, women’s groups in Latin America have mobilized in recent years to pass legislation criminalizing political violence and harassment against women. In 2012, Bolivia became the first country to approve such a law, following a 12-year effort by locally elected women to theorize the problem and place it on the national political agenda. Similar bills have been proposed in Ecuador, Mexico,

Peru, and Costa Rica. Although to date the legal route has not succeeded in holding more than a handful of perpetrators to account, many women in Bolivia view the law as a consciousness-raising tool, giving them vocabulary to describe their experiences and motivating them to address this problem in programs to train and support female candidates and elected officials. In May 2016, this law was bolstered by the decision of the Ministry of Justice to forbid people with a record of violence against women from being a candidate for political office.

Other state-led initiatives include creating new policies and institutions for measuring and responding to acts of violence against women in politics. In 2015, the National Commission on the Status of Women in Pakistan launched a new set of standardized indicators on violence against women, incorporating a measure for violence against women in the political arena. An all-party committee in the Canadian House of Commons developed a formal process for sexual harassment complaints in parliament and called for all MPs to receive training in the new code of conduct and take a pledge condemning sexual harassment. Alliances across parties, as well as state and non-state actors, can give further impetus to these efforts. In May 2016, current and former British female MPs joined forces to launch the “Reclaim the Internet” campaign, concerned that online harassment and bullying truncates public debate. In 2010-2011, the Organization of Active Women in Côte d’Ivoire partnered with state and international organizations to collect data on gendered experiences of electoral violence, confirming the existence and extent of the problem.

These ideas represent only a handful of potential solutions.<sup>33</sup> Actors at the global, national, and local levels can and should take steps – according to each sector’s strengths and capacities – to prevent, treat, and sanction violence against women in politics. Prevention

requires rendering violence unacceptable, collecting data and exchanging best practices for addressing and ending violence. Treatment might entail developing services and protocols for assisting survivors, while punishment would involve imposing sanctions, legal or otherwise, on perpetrators. Global momentum is building as women (and men) around the world recognize that violence against women in politics poses a serious threat to democracy. Mimoza Kusari-Lila, a female mayor in Kosovo, expresses a sentiment felt by growing numbers of politically active women around the world, keen to transform their negative experiences for the greater good: “I tell my opponents, you keep throwing stones at me and I will keep paving roads.”<sup>34</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliament: 20 Years in Review* (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Karen Celis et al., "Constituting Women's Interests through Representative Claims," *Politics & Gender* 10 (June 2014): 149-174; Christina Wolbrecht and David E. Campbell, "Leading by Example: Female Members of Parliament as Political Role Models," *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (October 2007): 921-939; Jennie E. Burnet, "Women Have Found Respect: Gender Quotas, Symbolic Representation, and Female Empowerment in Rwanda," *Politics & Gender* 7 (September 2011): 303-334.

<sup>3</sup> Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau, "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice toward Female Leaders," *Psychological Review* 109 (July 2002): 573-598.

<sup>4</sup> Gretchen Urnes Beito, *Coya Come Home: A Congresswoman's Journey* (Beverly Hills: Pomegranate Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Only direct quotes are followed by citations to sources. Sources for all other examples are on file with the author and can be supplied upon request.

<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/14/hillary-clinton-melinda-gates\\_n\\_4788406.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/14/hillary-clinton-melinda-gates_n_4788406.html); <http://www.thelocal.no/20151201/norway-pm-opens-up-about-online-abuse>; Julia Gillard, *My Story* (Sydney: Random House, 2014); <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/sheila-copps-i-was-raped-and-sexually-assaulted-1.2830561>

<sup>7</sup> For a more on developments in Latin America, see Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín, "Gender and Political Violence in Latin America," *Política y Gobierno* 23 (January 2016): 125-157.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>

<sup>9</sup> Walter S. DeKeseredy, "Current Controversies on Defining Nonlethal Violence against Women in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships," *Violence against Women* 6 (July 2000): 728-746.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/29/women-barred-voting-pakistan-khyber-pakhtunkh>.

<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/naz-shah/labour-muslim-women\\_b\\_9470786.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/naz-shah/labour-muslim-women_b_9470786.html); [http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/homenews/14447389.Sexist\\_online\\_attacks\\_are\\_driving\\_women\\_away\\_from\\_politics\\_Holyrood\\_candidate\\_claims/](http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/homenews/14447389.Sexist_online_attacks_are_driving_women_away_from_politics_Holyrood_candidate_claims/)

<sup>12</sup> Teresa Sacchet and Bruno Wilhelm Speck, "Financiamento eleitoral, representação política e gênero," *Opinião Pública* 18 (June 2012): 177-197.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.theestablishment.co/2016/03/29/the-shocking-sexualization-of-female-politicians-in-porn/>

<sup>14</sup> Some female local councilors have claimed that they themselves had requested to sit in different rooms, but female activists, male and female MPs, and two female councilors in Jeddah have spoken out strongly against the regulation. See <http://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-orders-women-segregated-from-men-in-council-meetings-1454522211>

<sup>15</sup> See [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ruth-marcus-sexism-in-the-senate/2014/08/29/9cb99e9e-2f98-11e4-bb9b-997ae96fad33\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ruth-marcus-sexism-in-the-senate/2014/08/29/9cb99e9e-2f98-11e4-bb9b-997ae96fad33_story.html); <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36258033>

<sup>16</sup> Eliana Suarez and Tahany M. Gadalla, "Stop Blaming the Victim: A Meta-Analysis on Rape Myths," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25 (November 2010): 2010-2035.

<sup>17</sup> U. S. Senate subcommittee hearing, *Suffrage Parade* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1913), 70.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/michelle-rempel-confront-your-sexism>; [http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/05/09/harcelement-et-politique-pour-que-l-impunite-cesse\\_1451542](http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/05/09/harcelement-et-politique-pour-que-l-impunite-cesse_1451542)

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer L. Berdahl, "The Sexual Harassment of Uppity Women," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92 (March 2007): 425-437.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://fortune.com/2016/04/22/julia-gillard-sexism/>; <http://factsonturkey.org/17692/sex-tape-claims-stir-turkish-politics/>

<sup>21</sup> Kristine Höglund, "Electoral Violence in Conflict-Ridden Societies," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21 (June 2009): 412-427.

<sup>22</sup> David V. James et al., "Aggressive/Intrusive Behaviours, Harassment, and Stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: A Prevalence Study and Cross-National Comparison," *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 27 (January 2016): 1-21.

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- <sup>23</sup> Two-thirds of respondents pointed to members of the same party, while one-third identified family members. See UN Women, *Violence Against Women in Politics* (New Delhi: UN Women, 2014), 62.
- <sup>24</sup> Bots are software applications that can be programmed to post comments automatically.
- <sup>25</sup> See <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/mar/12/wendy-davis-sxsw-2016-texas-trolls-online-abuse>
- <sup>26</sup> Gabrielle Bardall, *Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender and Electoral Violence* (Washington, DC: IFES, 2011), 13, 16; <http://larepublica.pe/28-04-2014/40-de-mujeres-que-ocupan-un-cargo-publico-sufren-acoso-politico>; <http://www.renamaperu.net/acoso-politico-contra-la-mujer/>; <http://rpp.pe/peru/actualidad/el-70-de-autoridades-acosan-politicamente-a-las-mujeres-noticia-830774>
- <sup>27</sup> See <http://www.myanmar-now.org/news/i/?id=7de02293-1d0c-45b3-ab45-9cfa922cb28a>; <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/28/world/europe/italy-politics-racism/>
- <sup>28</sup> Nathan A. Heflick and Jamie L. Goldenberg, "Objectifying Sarah Palin," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45 (May 2009): 598-601; Celinda Lake, *Findings from an Online Dial Survey of 800 Likely Voters Nationwide* (Washington, DC: Lake Research Partners, 2010); <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/mar/12/wendy-davis-sxsw-2016-texas-trolls-online-abuse>
- <sup>29</sup> Joakim Krantz et al, *Politikernas trygghetsundersökning* (Stockholm: Brottsförebyggande rådet, 2012); <http://www.jornadanet.com/n.php?a=84911-1>; <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/more-women-turning-off-politics-after-julia-gillard-was-badly-treated/story-fni6uo1m-1226801892247>; Rosie Campbell & Joni Lovenduski, *Footprints in the Sand: Five Years of the Fabian Women's Network Mentoring and Political Education Programme* (London: Fabian Society, 2016).
- <sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch, *"Good Girls Don't Protest": Repression and Abuse of Women Human Rights Defenders, Activists, and Protesters in Sudan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2016), 30, 46.
- <sup>31</sup> Lake, *Findings*.
- <sup>32</sup> See <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/07/opinions/madelaine-albright-protect-women-in-politics/>; [http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/03/18/news/\\_basta\\_con\\_gli\\_insulti\\_per\\_le\\_donne\\_in\\_politica\\_-135798110/](http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/03/18/news/_basta_con_gli_insulti_per_le_donne_in_politica_-135798110/); <http://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/seattle-women-dont-let-hateful-voices-intimidate-you-into-silence-or-inaction/>
- <sup>33</sup> For a more comprehensive list, see the #NotTheCost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics Global Call to Action at <https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>
- <sup>34</sup> Quotes from Rigobert, Minoves, and Kusari-Lila were made at the NDI #NotTheCost event in March 2016.