

# TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS: TOWARDS A GLOBAL CONSENSUS

BACKGROUND PAPER FOR NDI ROUNDTABLE<sup>1</sup>  
9-10 DECEMBER 2015

## Introduction

Women's right to political participation is enshrined in a host of international commitments, as well as national legislation. Article 7 of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), for example, states that countries should ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right (a) to vote in elections and be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies; (b) to participate in the formulation of government policy and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government; and (c) to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.<sup>2</sup> Similar statements can be found in the UN's Beijing Platform for Action,<sup>3</sup> the Millennium Development Goals,<sup>4</sup> and the Sustainable Development Goals,<sup>5</sup> all calling for women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. Applying this broad lens to understanding women's political participation, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has worked to support women in more than 70 countries around the world as civic leaders, voters, candidates, political party members, elected leaders, and electoral administrators.<sup>6</sup> The aim is to support women's active involvement in all parts of the political process, from voting to policy formulation and implementation.

Changes in women's participation are perhaps most visible in the electoral arena, and especially national parliaments, where the global average has nearly doubled from 11.3% in 1995 to 22.1% in 2015 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2015). A major factor behind this increase is the widespread introduction of gender quotas, mandating a greater share of women among electoral candidates and/or elected officials (Krook 2009). In many countries, debates on women's representation in parliament have, in turn, spilled over into other political arenas, most notably the executive branch, with growing numbers of women appointed as cabinet ministers (Jacob, Scherpereel and, Adams 2014; Krook and O'Brien 2012) and elected to positions of national leadership (Jalalzai 2013). The greater inclusion of women as political actors, however, has also been accompanied by a growing awareness that quotas and other measures to promote women in politics do not fully level the political playing field (Krook 2015).

As voters, women may face various forms of marginalization, ranging from physical violence to bar them from voting<sup>7</sup> to more subtle efforts to coerce their votes. After being nominated as candidates, women may confront negative reactions from their families and spouses, including the threat of ostracism or divorce, in an effort to curb their political ambition<sup>8</sup> – problems not generally experienced by their male counterparts. Once elected, women may encounter a host of subtle and not-so-subtle tactics to marginalize them and render them less effective, including pressures to conform to masculine

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<sup>1</sup> Tackling Violence Against Women in Politics is an initiative of the National Democratic Institute, which has commissioned Dr. Mona Lena Krook, Associate Professor at Rutgers University, as the program's chief technical advisor. The project is funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article7>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ndi.org/gender-women-democracy>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/29/women-barred-voting-pakistan-khyber-pakhtunkh>

<sup>8</sup> One woman who had run for office in Tunisia, for example, told NDI staff that her fiancé threatened to divorce her if she continued her candidacy.

norms of behavior (Acker 1992; Cockburn 1991). Finally, despite the greater presence of women in elected positions, female party members may find that spaces largely hidden from public view – like internal party decision-making bodies – remain solidly male-dominated (Verge and de la Fuente 2014). Gendered dynamics in society, together with gendered political institutions, can thus continue to make it difficult for women to vote, run for office, and exercise influence in legislatures and political parties, even as formal barriers to their participation are dismantled.

These forms of resistance to women’s inclusion as political actors have raised concerns among various sectors, who have labelled these dynamics political violence and harassment, violence against women in elections, and violence against women in politics. To date, most discussions have focused on the country or regional level – but viewed together, highlight the global nature of this phenomenon and point to this problem as an issue of global concern. In recent years, for example, national events on the topic – bringing together networks of elected women, journalists, judges, academics, and activists – have taken place in countries as diverse as the United Kingdom,<sup>9</sup> Mexico,<sup>10</sup> and Kenya.<sup>11</sup> Region-focused programs have also been launched by a variety of international actors, operating largely independently from one another. In 2014 and 2015, the National Democratic Institute began a program to monitor violence against women in elections focusing on five countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America;<sup>12</sup> UN Women partnered with the Centre for Social Research to conduct a study of violence against women in politics in South Asia;<sup>13</sup> and the Inter-American Commission on Women and Organization of American States convened an expert meeting and roundtable on political violence and harassment of women as a hemispheric challenge.<sup>14</sup> Resistance to women’s political participation is thus not limited to one country or region of the world. On the positive side, however, there is growing awareness of this problem – as well as an emerging willingness to combat it by activists, political parties, politicians, state bureaucrats, journalists, academics, and donor agencies.

The roundtable organized by NDI in December 2015 seeks to seize this opportunity to initiate a cross-regional dialogue on violence against women in politics, engaging actors familiar with discussions taking place in various regions, as well as experts on related topics like violence against women, sexual harassment, cyber-violence, and policing and victims’ services. Taking a broad perspective, the term “violence against women in politics” here refers to all forms of aggression, coercion, and intimidation against women as political actors. The goal of the roundtable is to share empirical examples from different regions, as well as theoretical concepts and findings from various academic disciplines, to explore collectively what violence against women in politics is, why it occurs, what forms it takes, and what solutions might be pursued. This meeting will be followed by a second event convened in March 2016 to highlight the issue on a global scale, as well as to exchange experiences and best practices from around the world. Taking place during the meetings of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, this international event will seek to engage high-level officials and opinion-makers, as well as politicians, practitioners, activists, and academics. The aim is to raise awareness of this phenomenon and establish a set of global principles for addressing violence against women in politics as a serious challenge to women’s full and active political participation.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.unwomenuk.org/violence-against-women-in-politics/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.criticapolitica.mx/89075>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2015/women%E2%80%99s-situation-room-africa%E2%80%99s-unique-approach-reducing-electoral-violence>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.ndi.org/violence against women elections](https://www.ndi.org/violence%20against%20women%20elections)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/4/press-release-new-research-reveals-violence-against-women-in-politics-rampant-in-south-asia>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.oas.org/en/media\\_center/press\\_release.asp?sCodigo=E-058/15](http://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-058/15)

To inform these discussions, this background paper outlines a series of theoretical issues and practical considerations related to conceptualizing and devising solutions to the problem of violence against women in politics. The points made here are by no means exhaustive, but serve to inform and motivate debate at the roundtable, in terms of (1) identifying theoretical literatures and areas of study that might be mobilized to better understand this problem; (2) recognizing practical obstacles and proposing ways to mitigate their effects in these debates; and (3) devising comprehensive and multi-faceted strategies to combat violence against women in politics in all its manifestations. The focus is thus both on developing greater conceptual clarity regarding what violence against women in politics 'is,' as well as in cultivating a broader consensus on the need and means for change.

### **Theoretical dimensions in the search for a concept**

Concept formation is a necessary first step when analyzing any political phenomenon, affecting the ability to collect accurate data, perform useful analyses, and develop concrete solutions to the problem (Sartori 1970). In efforts to pave the way for greater gender equality, feminist scholars and activists have also long recognized the importance of 'naming' an issue as a key way to 'de-naturalize' discriminatory behaviors (Friedan 1963). Emergence of new vocabulary can be both personally and politically important. On the one hand, it can help marginalized individuals to better comprehend their own experiences, as well as to realize that they share these experiences with others. On the other hand, it can also raise awareness among members of dominant groups regarding their own actions that they may not even realize are unjust. Evidence thus suggests that, with a new concept in hand, citizens are more likely to recognize and condemn discriminatory practices – whether occurring to themselves or to others (Flood and Pease 2009; Jaggar 1989).

Violence against women has long been associated with patriarchal prerogatives and/or justified as long-accepted cultural practices (Heise 1998). Although there is no universally accepted definition of 'violence against women' (Burgess and Crowell 1996), a growing number of researchers and government agencies contend that violence is multidimensional and should be understood in terms of a continuum of violent acts (DeKeseredy 2000). Article 1 of the International Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) thus defines 'violence against women' to be "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." This Declaration was one of the achievements of global campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s which argued that "women's rights are human rights," framing the problem as an affront to human dignity "distinctly connected to being female" (Bunch 1990, 486). A major achievement was their success in linking a variety of practices under a shared concept, highlighting violence against women as a problem in all countries, affecting women in every socio-economic group and life stage (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Peters and Wolper 1995; True 2012).

The genealogy of the 'violence against women' concept at the global level offers important lessons for current debates surrounding defining and combatting violence against women in politics. The first is to recognize that ideas about what 'counts' as 'violence' may not garner a full consensus among all actors. Arguments in favor of broader definitions must therefore seek to be theoretically robust as well as politically convincing. Fortunately, there are many scholarly studies – as well as a host of international conventions and commitments – that support comprehensive definitions of 'violence.' The second is to theorize explicitly how acts of violence are "distinctly connected to being female," thus giving a deeper discriminatory meaning to these acts, going above and beyond what these same acts would otherwise mean for the affected individuals. The third is to remain open to the many different forms that such violence might take at the country, regional, and global levels. Distinct cultures and political systems may generate varied tools for committing and justifying acts of aggression against

women – a diversity of forms that should be connected in order to map out the multiplicity of practices seeking to exclude women as political actors in a wide variety of places around the world.

### *Definitions of violence against women in politics*

Although female politicians around the world have long faced problems of aggression, coercion, and intimidation, the term ‘violence against women in politics’ has surfaced in only the last ten to fifteen years in various contexts around the globe. In Latin America, ‘political violence and harassment against women’ appeared for the first time in 2000, when local councilwomen convened a seminar on the topic at the Chamber of Deputies in Bolivia to discuss reports regarding acts directed at female candidates and elected officials in rural municipalities. Over the following twelve years, the Association of Local Councilwomen of Bolivia (ACOBOL), along with other female politicians and activists, worked together in an inductive manner to name this phenomenon and identify its various manifestations (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). These efforts culminated in 2012 in the passage of Law 243 against Political Harassment and Violence against Women, protecting female candidates, elected officials, appointees, and those exercising political functions who confront attempts by others to prevent their presence in decision-making positions for reasons of gender. Law 243 defines “political harassment” as “acts of pressure, persecution, molestation, or threats” and “political violence” as “acts and/or threats of physical, psychological, or sexual violence,” aimed at shortening, suspending, impeding, or restricting the exercise of a woman’s political position, or inducing a woman, against her will, to commit an act or fail to do something related to her political mandate.

Alongside discussions in Latin America, activists in other regions have identified a strikingly similar set of practices. In a multi-year project coordinated by South Asia Partnership International – resulting in several books and regional conferences in 2007, 2008, and 2009 – female politicians, activists, lawyers, researchers, academics, and members of the media engaged in a similar theory-building enterprise, sharing and comparing women’s experiences as political actors in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.<sup>15</sup> One of the project’s earliest publications used the phrase ‘violence against women in politics’ to describe acts perpetrated to hinder, punish, or deprive women of their right to participate in politics. It lists physical acts, like beating, pushing, molestation, sexual abuse, rape, kidnapping, and murder, as well as various types of psychological violence, like threats, harassment, verbal abuse, coercion, character assassination, and threats against family members (South Asia Partnership International 2006). The concept of ‘violence against women in elections’ appears to be slightly newer, growing out of a gendered analysis of data gathered by the International Foundation on Electoral Systems as part of its electoral assistance work (Bardall 2011). This is the terminology used by NDI as part of a new program launched in early 2015, piloted in five countries in three regions, focusing on “acts of election violence – such as threats, hate speech, assault, blackmail or assassination – that are directed at someone because of her gender and that seek to undermine, delay or otherwise influence an electoral process.”<sup>16</sup>

Viewing these discussions side by side, it is clear that similar concerns are being raised in various corners of the world – albeit with different vocabulary and relatively little cross-national conversation. A first attempt to explore these issues globally, moreover, limited its focus to women as politicians – not as women as political actors more broadly. This work, by Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín (2014, 2016), involved collecting NGO reports, bills and laws, and news items from around the world, as well as reviewing scholarly literatures on violence against women and political and electoral violence. On this basis, they define ‘violence against women in politics’ as behaviors that specifically target women *as women* to leave politics by pressuring them to step down as candidates or resign a particular

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<sup>15</sup> [http://sapi.org.np/november\\_event.php?mode=print&type=](http://sapi.org.np/november_event.php?mode=print&type=)

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.ndi.org/violence\\_against\\_women\\_elections](https://www.ndi.org/violence_against_women_elections)

political office. As such, while inflicted on a particular woman, these actions are – in effect – directed at *all* women, in an attempt to preserve politics as a male domain. While restricted to female politicians, this definition can be expanded to women engaged in any type of political activity, electoral or not. This is because acts of aggression, coercion, and intimidation directed at women as voters, party members, civil society activists, and electoral administrators often have the exactly same purpose: to restrict the political participation of *women as a group*. As such, they reflect a case of gender-based discrimination.

Importantly, when female political actors are attacked for their political views alone, this is *not* a case of violence against women in politics: it is not the target, but rather the motive behind violence that is the crucial distinction between violence against women in politics and violence against politicians in general (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2014). The distinction becomes blurred, however, due to the fact that the means for attacking women as political actors often relies on gendered scripts, focusing on women's bodies and their traditional social roles – primarily as mothers and wives – to deny or undercut their competence in the political sphere. In particular, women's modesty or propriety may be called into question, or suggestions may be made they are merely figureheads for male politicians, only rising to power in the service of others.<sup>17</sup> Using gendered imagery or stereotypes to attack female opponents can thus evolve into a case of violence against women in politics, as the message communicated through these tropes is that women *per se* do not belong in the political realm. Consequently, these acts have a much broader meaning beyond their individual target: they seek to intimidate other female political actors, deter women who might consider engaging in politics, and communicate to society as a whole that women should not participate in politics in any capacity.

#### *Causes of violence against women in politics*

To understand why violence against women in politics occurs, it is useful to revisit early research in gender studies, observing an association in many societies between men and the 'public sphere' of politics and the economy and women with the 'private sphere' of home and the family (Elshtain 1981; Landes 1988). The participation of women in politics – in all capacities – thus poses a fundamental challenge to prior beliefs and practices regarding politics as a male domain (Pateman 1994). Acts of violence against women in politics, it appears, are perpetrated with the intent of reinstating this traditional divide by compelling women to leave the public sphere, in favor of pursuing their private sphere obligations (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). Like other types of violence against women, in other words, such acts serve as a form of gender role enforcement, using means of domination and control to subordinate women as a group (Donat and D'Emilio 1992; O'Connell 1993). Although the goal is to preserve male power and dominance, however, it is important to recognize that perpetrators may include both men and women, acting in similar ways to preserve existing gender roles.

Academic studies from a variety of disciplines support this interpretation. Studies on gender-based violence, for example, find that men who express the greatest hostility towards women tend to espouse traditional views regarding gender roles, using violence as a way to overcome feelings of insecurity and regain a sense of power and control (Stermac, Segal, and Gillis 1990). Research in psychology suggests that men and women may 'punish' women who behave counter-stereotypically by aspiring to leadership positions (Rudman and Phelan 2008), evaluating female leaders more negatively than male leaders even when they have similar qualifications or levels of performance (Eagly and Karau 2002). Sociologists have detailed how women's mere presence can be unsettling to reigning standards and practices of political life, precisely because the public realm has been constructed through women's exclusion (Puwar 2004). Acts of violence against women in politics thus embody a form of backlash to

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<sup>17</sup> In Malaysia, for example, a woman candidate faced questions about her moral character when a false photo of a woman in a bikini, said to be her, was circulated and went viral. In Costa Rica, an attack ad on presidential candidate Laura Chinchilla portrayed her as a marionette operated by then-president Oscar Arias.

women's inclusion in the political sphere and, indeed, violent reactions may be especially acute when those women espouse political agendas related to women's rights (Krantz, Wallin, and Wallin 2012), as this can provoke an even stronger negative response from those who perceive and fear a loss of power (Mansbridge and Shames 2008).

### *Forms of violence against women in politics*

Most debates globally identify three forms of violence against women in politics: physical, sexual, and psychological. Although this mirrors most international commitments and domestic legislation in this regard, greater discussion and awareness of the concept has led to a proliferation of examples included under these two categories. Viewing the emerging global evidence through the lens of feminist and non-feminist research on violence, it is possible to identify two further forms of violence: economic and symbolic (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). Boundaries between types are somewhat porous, however, with specific behaviors potentially falling into several categories. At the same time, multiple forms of violence may be perpetrated simultaneously or in an escalating fashion. These overlaps, however, strengthen the argument for connecting these various acts under a single umbrella concept. Moreover, recognizing these varied types of violence is important in acknowledging that distinct cultures may provide different 'tools' for disciplining women – giving meaning to actions, as well as conditioning the degree to which such behaviors are normalized.

Accusations that a woman is a bad wife, mother, or daughter can be especially devastating in a small local community, where families share a dense network of social ties, or in cultures where a woman's 'honor' is seen as an extension of her family. Similarly, where extensive gender inequality exists – or there are high levels of violence, political or otherwise – such acts may be simply viewed as 'life as usual' in that society, fostering a culture of impunity. Acts perpetrated via social media, by a similar logic, assume greater meaning where citizens have access to computers and cell phones. Despite cross-cultural variations, however, two features stand out across offenses. First, women's sexuality is a potent symbol, with rape threats and questions about a woman's sexual identity or morality becoming a medium by which they are depreciated (Bardall 2013; Herrera, Arias, and García 2011). Second, distinct from 'normal' political violence committed by political opponents, acts against women may originate from varied corners: from society, like a woman's family, friends, and community or religious leaders; from the political sector, including colleagues and leaders from opposing parties as well as a woman's own party; and from state actors, like security forces and the police (Herrera, Arias, and García 2011; SAP International 2006). In other words, despite seeking to curtail women's political participation (i.e., a public sphere activity), violence against women in politics may be perpetrated in both the public and the private spheres, by a much wider range of actors than are normally involved in political violence.

In terms of specific types and examples, *physical violence* involves injuries inflicted on women's bodies, as well as acts of bodily harm to her family members when she is the target. Physical violence against women as political actors may be perpetrated by outsiders, like activists from another party, but it may also be inflicted by rivals within a woman's own party or even members of her own family. It is distinguished from other acts of physical violence in the political sphere by its goal to prevent a woman's participation *as a woman*, not as an individual or party member *per se*. As such, despite personalized experiences of abuse, victims of violence against women in politics are largely 'interchangeable.' Examples include assassination, kidnapping, beating, and domestic abuse, as well as assassination and kidnapping of family members.

*Sexual violence* is often more difficult for policy makers or election observers to conceptualize as political violence, particularly as much of it happens in the private sphere or otherwise out of sight. As such, it can be dismissed as acts that are impossible to monitor, let alone penalize. Nonetheless, sexual violence is often listed as a distinct category in many domestic laws and international conventions on violence against women. Examples of this kind of violence include sexual harassment and rape, as well

as various forms of sexual exploitation. The latter might include using women's bodies to attract attention at campaign events, as has been criminalized in Guatemala, or forcing women to perform sexual favors in order to secure their nomination for elected office or a position in their parties, as has been reported in Tanzania.<sup>18</sup>

*Psychological violence* inflicts trauma on the mental state or emotional well-being of individuals, creating anxiety, depression, and stress. This violence may entail threats of physical violence, as well as a host of different acts intended to socially harm the woman in question. The limited research on violence against women in elections indicates that psychological violence may be a tool particularly directed at female politicians (Bardall 2011). Death and rape threats, character assassination, social boycotts, and stalking are all examples of this type of violence. Current discussions across Latin America add a host of other acts under the heading of 'psychological violence,' but academic research from various disciplines suggest these can be conceptualized as two further forms of violence (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016).

One set can be described as forms of *economic violence*, involving coercion by controlling a person's access to economic resources (Fawole 2008). In politics, this may entail conditioning women's entry to, or behavior in, political office or party leadership positions by systematically restricting their access to economic resources which are otherwise available to men. The aim is to make the task so difficult or frustrating that women are led to withdraw of their own accord, or to reduce the chances that women can do their jobs effectively, thus affecting their future political careers. Examples include denying women – but not men – campaign resources when they are candidates, or salaries, expenses, office space, and supplies once they have been elected. For women activists inside political parties, it can involve denying women funds that they are entitled to by law, even when earmarked by the state for women's political activities. The absence of financial support may be especially difficult for women, as women are less likely than men to be connected to the formal and informal networks that can supply campaign funds or the personal resources to compensate for denied expense claims (Sidhu and Meena 2007). Gender inequalities in the access to resources in society more generally thus can exacerbate acts to withhold funds from women, necessary for conducting their campaigns or day-to-day political work – leading in some extreme cases to pressures for women to exchange sex for monetary support.

A second set of acts involve forms of *symbolic violence*, operating at the level of portrayal and representation to confirm an individual's placement in a social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984). Culturally embedded, these forms of violence are particularly powerful because they look or feel 'right,' leading targets to often be complicit with these acts rather than seeing them as tools of domination (Galtung 1990; Kraus 1993). Due to the great diversity of cultures in the world, the form and content of symbolic violence vary more widely than the three other types. Symbolic violence seeks to delegitimize female politicians, activists, and voters through gendered tropes denying them competence and visibility in the political sphere. Going beyond healthy media criticism or 'normal' rude behavior, such treatment becomes violence when it entails fundamental disrespect for human dignity, like producing and distributing highly sexualized and derogatory images, using social media to incite violent acts, or explicitly denying the existence of a female political actor for the simple fact of being a woman. Women's voices, for example, can be actively silenced in parliaments or party meetings, with women's microphones being cut off or their speeches interrupted by sexist heckling from their male colleagues. Female voters may be denied their voting rights, with female polling stations being blocked or male family members seeking to cast votes on women's behalf.

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<sup>18</sup> From conversations between NDI and domestic election observers or women's rights activists in each country during 2015.

## **Practical considerations in the search for change**

Theoretical discussions are crucial to the concept formation process, both for developing robust definitions for scholarly research, as well as for creating clear understandings to serve as basis of policy reform (Sartori 1970; Goertz 2006). However, scholars like Collier and Adcock (1999) also suggest that – instead of searching for a single ‘correct’ or ‘best’ meaning – how we understand and operationalize a concept should also depend in part on what we seek to do with it. They advocate distinguishing among ‘background’ and ‘systematized’ concepts, where background concepts refer to the constellation of meanings and understandings associated with a given concept, while systematized concepts reflect specific definitions used in particular situations (Adcock and Collier 2001). A complementary view comes from the literature on ‘framing processes’ in social movements, referring to efforts by activists to confer meaning to their mobilization (Snow and Benford 1988). In a fluid and hostile environment, effective ‘signifying work’ can go a long way to attract and shape media coverage, win the support of bystander publics, constrain opponents, and influence state authorities, with the most successful frames being those that “package...issues simply and in ways that are consistent with the ideals and contemporary themes of civic life” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 309). Taken together, these two approaches indicate a need to be pragmatic about definitions in order to maximize the chances of political change.

### *Alternative names*

The name given to a particular phenomenon can thus play a crucial role in cultivating public and political support for recognizing its existence and for taking steps to combat the problem. Names, in other words, have an evaluative dimension, establishing what the issue ‘is’ and, by extension, why it deserves public attention. Concept formation can thus be a strategic process, exploring which ‘frames’ might be most useful in building a strong argument to this effect. In the specific case of violence against women in politics, global discussions are still at a nascent stage in this respect, even if there is growing consensus around terms like violence against women in politics, violence against women in elections, and political violence and harassment against women. An under-explored element in these discussions, however, is the degree to which this issue can be linked up to existing legal frameworks, including international conventions, to bolster support for change.

A key challenge appears to be difficulty on the part of many actors with using the term ‘violence’ to describe the range of behaviors witnessed globally that are aimed at reducing women’s access to political office and effectiveness as political actors. Perhaps the main reaction reflects concerns about exaggeration. Embracing a broad definition of ‘violence,’ the argument goes, may undermine how seriously people take this debate – in addition to raising practical questions about how to identify cases of violence. This objection parallels the discussion in the literature on violence against women in general, as to whether to limit the term ‘violence’ to acts involving physical harm, or whether to extend it to a wider range of aggressive behaviors (DeKeseredy 2000; Kilpatrick 2004). It is certainly true that acts of physical harm are easier to ‘see,’ and therefore enter into evidence, but a growing body of law – including international conventions – does recognize a wider range of acts as forms of ‘violence.’ The International Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, for example, identifies that violence may take various forms of physical, sexual, or psychological harm.

However, there appears to be the greatest resistance to notions of economic and symbolic violence. Yet studies show that coercive control – a hallmark of economic violence – may feel worse than physical violence for many women. Coercive control includes efforts to “hurt, humiliate, intimidate, exploit, isolate, and dominate” victims, a key strategy being the denial or appropriation of economic resources (Stark 2007, 5). Similarly, symbolic violence can be more powerful than physical violence, precisely because these forms of discipline are culturally embedded (Galtung 1990), rendering them “subtle, euphemized, invisible” (Krais 1993, 172). Targets thus often modify their behaviors and aspirations accordingly, making them complicit in their own oppression. When targets do become



conscious of these power dynamics, further, they may not be believed – but instead ridiculed using negative stereotypes associated with their group as being ‘irrational’ or ‘angry’ or ‘hysterical.’ Further, in many cases, acts of economic and symbolic violence are not isolated behaviors, but rather elements in a larger pattern of aggressions creating a hostile work environment for female politicians.

There are, therefore, strong theoretical grounds for using the term ‘violence’ to refer to wide variety of behaviors perpetrated against women in politics. At a practical level, however, this choice of terminology may be counterproductive. For example, this consideration appears to be behind ACOBOL’s decision in Bolivia to add the term ‘harassment’ in its lobbying for Law 243, with a very detailed list of examples of harassment and violence in the political realm. Interestingly, while the legislation condemns physical and sexual acts, all of the explicit examples given in the law itself reflect cases of psychological, economic, and symbolic violence (although the law calls these forms of psychological violence) (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016).

These acts include: imposing tasks unrelated to the job itself;<sup>19</sup> giving women erroneous or imprecise information leading to the inadequate exercise of their functions; preventing appointed or elected women from attending sessions or other activities involving decision-making; providing false or incomplete information to electoral authorities regarding the identity or sex of candidates;<sup>20</sup> impeding or restricting a woman’s re-nomination or election when she performs her office correctly; restricting a woman’s ability to speak in sessions, committees, or other meetings inherent in her job; restricting or impeding women from assuming office who have been elected through the procedures of indigenous or Afro-Bolivian groups; imposing unjustified sanctions that restrict a woman’s exercise of her political rights; applying illegal economic sanctions or withholding women’s salaries; divulging personal and private information to force women to resign or request a leave from their positions; spreading false information with the objective of discrediting a woman’s leadership and obtaining her resignation or leave of her position; forcing women to resign their positions; and obligating elected women – through force or intimidation – to sign documents or take decisions against their will.

In other contexts, there are additional reasons for avoiding the word ‘violence’ in favor of alternative terminology. In Peru, for example, a bill to tackle political harassment against women was proposed in 2013. Although its content is very similar to the Bolivian law, the word ‘violence’ does not appear anywhere in the document – avoided, according to various sources, due to its association with the history of armed conflict in Peru (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). A distinct solution was raised at an informal meeting in October 2014 between the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians, bringing together female members of parliament from around the world, and the Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, investigating cases where the human rights of elected officials have been violated, for example by being illegally detained and imprisoned for their views or removed from their seats. Seeking to be pragmatic, recognizing that there might be wide variations in cultural understandings of violence, women parliamentarians at the meeting proposed the term ‘discrimination’ as a possible alternative designation to capture the wide array of behaviors falling under the rubric of violence against women in politics.<sup>21</sup>

### *Gendered barriers to recognition*

Giving a name to a phenomenon can have important empowering effects, enabling individuals to better understand their own experiences and raising awareness across society regarding dynamics

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<sup>19</sup> What is meant by this phrase is not made explicit in the law, but interviews with women in Latin America indicate that this might include making coffee or performing secretarial tasks for colleagues.

<sup>20</sup> In previous elections, political parties had attempted to circumvent the gender quota law by ‘misspelling’ the male names on their candidate lists to appear as if they were female.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication with Kareen Jabre, IPU Gender Partnership Programme, October 2014.

that may be unjust. The concept of ‘sexual harassment’ offers a well-known example, relabeling acts of sexual coercion in the workplace as exercises of dominance and discrimination, rather than as forms of flirtation and flattery. Although the concept continues to be debated, it has steadily gained recognition both in international law and national legislation. Data from the United States reveals that once the term ‘sexual harassment’ entered the public lexicon, the number of reported cases increased and has held steady ever since (Drobac 2005). Nonetheless, many women often do not lodge complaints – and those who do may be targets of retaliation, including character assassination, hostility from their colleagues, and even further forms of harassment (Kaiser and Miller 2003; Vijayasiri 2008). Women themselves may also contribute to victim-blaming, expressing hostility towards women who report sexual harassment (Cowan 2000; Russell and Trigg 2004) and/or excusing instances of harassment as ‘normal’ male sexual behavior (Weiss 2009).

These dynamics appear to operate among female politicians as well, albeit with an additional layer of pressure related to being a political official – and thus being subject to greater public scrutiny. For some, the acts of violence described above may simply be viewed as the ‘cost of doing politics.’ In 2014, for example, Hillary Clinton, when launching an initiative to support women seeking public roles, stated that her best advice to women in politics was to “grow skin like a rhinoceros.”<sup>22</sup> Julia Gillard, in a biography published after she left office, expresses her frustration with misogynistic treatment during her time as the prime minister of Australia. Yet she writes that she felt compelled not to speak out while she was in office, fearing that charges that she “hysterical” or “not coping” with the demands of the job might only serve to justify claims that women do not belong in politics (Gillard 2014).

A subtle shift appears to be underway, however, in terms of female politicians acknowledging this problem – in part, it seems, because defining the concept resonates with, and finally gives a name, to their experiences. At a side event sponsored by the IPU at the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women meetings in 2013, for example, a short presentation on the concept of violence against women politics to a room full of female politicians from around the world was met with vigorous nodding from a large portion of participants. Many female politicians immediately grasp the concept when it is explained to them,<sup>23</sup> and while few female politicians claim to be victims of such violence, many freely acknowledge that it occurs to other women (Cerva Cerna 2014). NDI focus groups in Nigeria with female voters and activists also referred to problems of shame and “disgrace” keeping women silent, although gaining consciousness of the problem, participants were emphatic in their discussion and condemnation of violent acts that had previously been kept quiet.<sup>24</sup>

The limited evidence that exists also suggests in unambiguous terms that female politicians around the world do have negative experiences with violence against women in politics, whether or not they speak out directly about these issues. Qualitative studies based on interview evidence, for example, suggest that incidents of violence can cause female politicians to feel demoralized, making them less likely to stand for reelection and thus to leave after fewer terms served (Herrera, Arias, and Garcia 2011; SAP International 2006). Quantitative data corroborates this argument. In Sweden over 30% of female respondents in a survey of local politicians said they considered giving up their positions as a result of these incidents (Krantz, Wallin, and Wallin 2012). The impact is not restricted to women currently in office, either. In an Australian study, 60% of women aged 18 to 21 and 80% of women over the age of 31 said they were less likely to run for office after seeing how negatively Julia Gillard was treated by the media (Shepherd 2014). In Pakistan, following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007, many women refrained or were actively discouraged from voting by village elders or their husbands (Bardall 2011).

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<sup>22</sup> [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)

<sup>23</sup> Interviews, Mexico City, May and July 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Participant comments as described in focus group report, October 2015.

### *Objections based on free speech*

The right to free speech is a central element in a healthy democratic society, and as a result, candidates and elected officials should face criticisms and challenges related to their policy ideas and performance – at the same time that voters should be able to express their political views freely. Yet it is also possible to argue that certain behaviors ‘cross the line’ from free speech to violence when they are directed at women *as women* with the purpose of leading them to withdraw from political life. For female politicians, criticism – both fair and unfair – is often framed as the ‘cost of doing politics,’ thus placing the onus on them to deal privately with acts constituting violence against women in politics. A second implication is that critics are empowered to say what they like with relative impunity, bolstered by constitutional guarantees in many countries regarding freedom of expression – as well as Article 19 of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

A similar problem can be faced by women as voters and political activists. During the campaign period in Haiti’s September 2015 elections, for example, a woman attending a rally run by President Michel Martelly for his party’s candidate stood up to openly criticize his government. In response, Martelly told her to “find a man and go into the bushes,” effectively dismissing her concerns with a sexist joke by suggesting she could solve her problems through sex.<sup>25</sup> While Martelly broke no laws, remarks like this cross over into violence, targeting not only against the woman who stood up but also dismissing out of hand all women as active citizens and voters. In all of these cases, political processes are rendered problematic and exclusionary – and in the most extreme scenarios, electoral processes are effectively nullified and democracy itself undermined in favor of forces of intimidation and coercion.

These issues have taken on new depths with the development of internet technologies. As Bardall (2013) points out, social media in particular has emerged as a new platform for perpetrating violence against women in electoral contexts. It can be used to threaten or incite violence against female voters or politicians, as well as to circulate images and messages sexualizing, ridiculing, or shaming individual women in the political realm – reaching wide audiences, behind a veil of relative anonymity with little personal consequence. These insights coincide with emerging academic literature indicating that women are increasingly the target of on-line violence, which some users defend in the name of ‘free speech’ but others describe as tantamount to “hate crimes in cyberspace” (Citron 2014).

Debates regarding ‘hate crimes’ provide a useful parallel. Hate crime legislation in the United States imposes a higher class of penalties when a violent crime involves targeting a victim due to his or her perceived membership in a certain social group. Such laws have been criticized as violations of the right to free speech (Gellman 1991), with perpetrators being punished for their bias in addition to being held accountable for their crimes (Dillof 1997). For some, this is tantamount to restricting citizens’ rights in the face of divisive ‘identity politics’ (Jacobs and Potter 1997). Yet there are also good reasons to view hate crimes as distinct class of offenses, involving a second layer of motivations, because these crimes are perpetrated – using mechanisms of power and oppression – to reaffirm what are perceived to be threatened hierarchies (Perry 2001). Hate crimes are thus “message crimes,” intended to deny equal access to rights to group members *and* to create a ripple effect that heightens the sense of vulnerability among other members of the community (Iganski 2001). Failure to respond to such acts by reaffirming equality among citizens, consequently, amounts to tacit endorsement of the violence directed towards its members (Kauppinen 2014).

### **Devising solutions and moving forward**

‘Violence against women in politics’ is still a relatively new concept, even as its existence – and its impact – is increasingly recognized around the globe. Defining the exact contours of what it ‘is’ – and, indeed, what it should be called – is still an ongoing process. This background paper has sought to

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<sup>25</sup> <http://news.yahoo.com/officials-exit-haiti-govt-over-presidents-remarks-woman-192320077.html>

outline theoretical issues to incorporate, as well as practical problems to consider, in future discussions taking place at the national, regional, and global levels. The take-away message is the need to balance theoretical depth and coherence with pragmatic steps to ensure adequate attention and response to this problem by actors in the political realm and within society at large. The issues outlined above point to at least three recommendations for moving these debates forward in a productive manner.

### *Reframing the issue*

The discussion above highlights the importance of theorizing a persuasive concept of violence against women in politics in order to garner broad public support for tackling this problem. One possible solution is to take seriously the distinction proposed by Adcock and Collier (2001) between background and systematized concepts. This notion suggests that scholars, politicians, and activists should embrace a broad and comprehensive ‘background’ definition of ‘violence against women in politics,’ but consider employing different ‘systematized’ concepts – using distinct labels and possibly emphasizing different aspects of this phenomenon – depending on the situation. Including the notion of symbolic violence, for example, may complicate efforts to pursue legal reforms, given the power of claims regarding freedom of speech. Legal definitions might therefore exclude this dimension of violence, at the same time that a more holistic approach to combatting violence against women in politics would include other measures – for example, Twitter or other types of social media campaigns – to condemn acts of symbolic violence.

A second solution, not mutually exclusive with the first, is to draw on the insights of framing processes to think strategically about what violence against women in politics ‘is’ in order to align it with other concepts that are widely accepted as being problematic – and, in turn, which legal frameworks to mobilize to support claims condemning violence against women in politics. One approach, discussed in countries like Mexico and Tunisia,<sup>26</sup> is to insert an article on violence against women in politics into laws prohibiting violence against women. The need to combat violence against women is widely recognized by international organizations and national governments, with the UN pushing all states to adopt and enforce, by 2015, laws that address and punish all forms of such violence.<sup>27</sup> A second possibility is to emphasize the political rights aspect of these violations, taking a cue from the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, to highlight that democracy and human rights are challenged when public officials are prevented through intimidation and coercion from exercising the functions to which they have been elected or appointed (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016).

A third option is to frame the issue as ‘discrimination,’ as suggested by the IPU Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians. While the concept of discrimination might appear too weak – almost a euphemism – to describe cases of violence against women in politics, it is also the tool for gender equality with the widest national and international reach. Constitutions in over 130 countries, for example, explicitly guarantee equality between women and men.<sup>28</sup> In addition, 189 states – that is, almost every single country in the world – have signed the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). Article 1 defines discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women...on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” Article 7 explicitly links this to political participation, stating that governments will “ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right...to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government.” Acts of violence against women in politics *as women* – in a wide variety of

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews, Mexico City, July 2014, and Tunis, September 2015.

<sup>27</sup> <http://endviolence.un.org/about.shtml>

<sup>28</sup> <http://constitutions.unwomen.org/>

political roles – can thus be framed as a violation of national and international commitments to non-discrimination in the political realm.

Framing acts of violence against women as types of sex- and gender-based discrimination is consistent with existing legal definitions. The International Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), for example, views violence against women as a manifestation of discrimination against women, as “one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.” Sexual harassment is also frequently defined in national and international legislation as a form of sex discrimination. The European Union Directive on sexual harassment (2002), for example, states that sexual harassment “shall be deemed to be discrimination on the grounds of sex and therefore prohibited.” Indeed, law scholars like Schultz (2006) argue in favor of broadening the legal definition of sexual harassment to include all discriminatory conduct against women in the workplace *as women* with the intention of preserving male competence and authority *as men*.

### *Legal reforms*

As debates have emerged globally on the issue of violence against women in politics, the predominant solution that has surfaced across Latin America has been legal reform. The case of Bolivia has inspired similar proposals in Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Costa Rica (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). The Bolivian law not only presents an extensive list of examples, but also enumerates that acts of political violence and harassment might be committed by one or more people, directly or through third parties, against female candidates and public officials as well as members of their families. It stipulates that violations can be denounced by the victim, her relatives, or any other person, in verbal or written form. The law imposes penalties of two to five years of prison for political harassment, three to eight years for physical or psychological violence, and the prevailing sanction for sexual assault according to the criminal code. Aggravating factors that may increase these penalties include (1) acts committed against a pregnant woman, someone older than 60, with limited education, or with a disability; (2) acts committed by a person in a leadership position in a political party, a citizen movement, or the public service, or if the person has recommitted acts of political harassment or violence against women; and (3) acts committed by two or more people. Parties responsible for implementing this law comprise the ministry of justice, the electoral authorities, and leaders at different levels of government.

Prior to this path-breaking reform, debates in Bolivia already played a role in initiating broader discussions across the region (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). In 2007, after the legislative initiative that became Law 243 was first presented, the 10<sup>th</sup> Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean signed the Quito Consensus acknowledging the issue on a broader scale for the first time. Attendees agreed as a group to move to “adopt legislative measures and institutional reforms to prevent, sanction, and eradicate political and administrative harassment against women who achieve decision-making positions through election or appointment, both at the national and local levels, as well as in political parties and movements.”<sup>29</sup> In March 2013, a bill to prevent and eradicate political violence and harassment against women in Costa Rica specified a novel punishment, namely that being convicted of such acts would cause a person to lose an elected or appointed positions, if they hold one, and to be disqualified from running for public office in the future.

### *Advocacy and reform*

Focusing on legal reform as the primary answer, however, has important limits and has thus far found roots primarily in one region, Latin America, and has largely focused on violence against female politicians. To date, the law in Bolivia has not been fully effective, with police often attributing acts of violence against women in politics to ‘general insecurity’ rather than to violence stemming from

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<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.cepal.org/publicaciones/xml/9/29489/dsc1i.pdf>

discrimination against women in the political sphere. In response, ACOBOL has initiated a project to monitor implementation of the law in order to push for timely resolution of cases.<sup>30</sup> These outcomes highlight the need to consider other strategies that might be pursued alongside – or in lieu of – legislation (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). A wider definition of violence against women in politics to focus on women in a variety of political roles also suggests a need to explore what other measures might be developed to tackle violence against women in other political roles, as voters, party members, activists, and even electoral administrators.

In Asia, for example, civil society partnerships and networks have been created to monitor, document, and address issues of violence against women in politics at the local, national, and regional levels. In 2006 and 2007, SAP International worked in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, with the support of Oxfam. The network sought to facilitate dialogues among female politicians in the project countries to devise shared understanding of this phenomenon, work towards greater public awareness, lobby for legal change, and build alliances among advocacy groups. In Kenya, addressing violence against female voters and candidates, the International Federation of Women Lawyers set up a text messaging system to enhance reporting on violations of women’s rights before, during, and after elections.<sup>31</sup> Other civil society initiatives focus on using social media to expose and combat violence against women in politics. In response to an on-line game to slap Hillary Clinton, for example, EMILY’s List, an advocacy group raising funds to support women’s political campaigns, mobilized its on-line network to collect 20,000 signatures in 24 hours to demand that political groups suspend funding to the Hillary Project and any other group advocating violence against women (Bardall 2013).

Political parties, further, can also be effective spaces to combat violence, on the part of both internal and external forces. Externally, CSOs can initiate tools such as ‘score cards’ or other ways to monitor parties’ respect for the rights of women to participate as party members and leaders, as well as in elections, without fear of violence. The Women Advocates Research and Documentation Center in Nigeria, for example, monitored and ranked parties’ adherence to gender mandates in law and party governance in the 2011 elections. Internally, parties can pass or revise bylaws, or adopt codes of conduct or public pledges to ensure women’s safety. These pledges can be adopted individually or in coalition. In Sierra Leone, for example, eight parties signed an “open and safe” election pledge that strictly opposed all forms of violence and intimidation against women (Kellow 2010). During elections, electoral management bodies can also help establish these codes of conduct or implement their own policies to prohibit electoral violence against women candidates, voters, or officials, and can provide mechanisms to enforce those policies and provide adjudication and timely resolution of complaints.

In sum, a variety of counter-strategies have started to be developed to cast light on the phenomenon of violence against women in politics, drawing in actors at a variety of levels. Specific strategies are likely to have varying degrees of impact on the prevalence and acceptance of this phenomenon. Moreover, different solutions may be suitable for combatting distinct types of violence. Legal remedies, most notably, may – for pragmatic reasons – be best restricted to physical and possibly psychological manifestations. Not only are such aggressions more readily recognized as ‘violence,’ but this strategy may set public debates on a path towards more nuanced understandings of what violence ‘is’ over time. Civil society and political party strategies, in turn, can play a vital role in creating pressures for reform, while also offering spaces to discuss economic and symbolic violence. The existence of diverse forms of violence, in other words, suggests a need for multi-dimensional approaches to spotlight, address, and dismantle ongoing resistance to women’s political inclusion.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://totimes.no/mundo-hispanohablante/america-del-sur/america-central-del-sur/bolivia/bolivia-2013-la-situacion-de-la-mujer-boliviana-desde-las-leyes-del-estado-plurinacional-2/>

<sup>31</sup> [http://fidakenya.org/?page\\_id=27](http://fidakenya.org/?page_id=27)

## Conclusions

The problem of violence against women in politics is thus not limited to one country or region of the world or to women undertaking one type of political activity. While it has long existed, this problem appears to have emerged with greater force in recent years as the number of women in political office has grown. One possibility is that having more women as political actors may simply multiply the sites of potential violence. Alternately, women's greater political voice and visibility may appear threatening to those concerned with preserving the status quo, exacerbating tendencies towards violence as a means to forestall change. Finally, greater discussion of the need to enhance women's political participation may be fostering greater consciousness worldwide regarding inequality in political life – in turn, casting new light on dynamics that have been occurring for many years. Whatever the reason, greater attention to this phenomenon has become evident in recent years, raising questions about how this problem should be understood and tackled at the level of political practice.

In this endeavor, engaging in a cross-regional – and cross-disciplinary – dialogue across the academic-practitioner divide is important for a number of different reasons. First, examining debates in distinct countries can help with identifying the shared challenges globally to opening up the political world to women. A more accurate understanding of the problem can generate better-informed recommendations for change. Second, comparing experiences across countries and regions can assist with mapping the various manifestations of resistance, aiding their recognition in other contexts. This is especially important when introducing a new concept to policy debates, so that citizens are empowered with the knowledge that can enable them to identify instances of violence. Third, building connections can facilitate the exchange of ideas regarding the best ways to combat this problem – as well as lessons learned from prior experiences in terms of challenges and ways forward. To date, there have been a host of impressive national and regional alliances to address the problem of violence against women in politics, all of which can – and should – be activated in a broader global discussion.

Attending to these dynamics is crucial for ensuring that violence against women in politics does not undermine the civil and political rights of women, as individuals and as a collective, and thereby threaten broader prospects for inclusion and democracy. Insights from various academic literatures, as well as practitioner experiences, indicate that acts of aggression, coercion, and intimidation against women as voters, party members, activists, politicians, and electoral administrators should not be dismissed as 'normal politics.' Rather, such acts are more accurately viewed both as a rising threat to global efforts to recognize, incorporate, and empower women as political actors, as well as a phenomenon that undermines the development of democratic culture, institutions, and practice.

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