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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

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 135th 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,⁷ 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.⁸

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

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

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 forc

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women – but not men – the funding necessary to wage successful campaigns.¹²

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

than 300 marchers, police officers did nothing, famously telling the women: "There would be nothing like this happen if you would stay at home."¹⁷ 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 *Le Monde*, entitled "Let's end the conspiracy of silence!" ([Le Monde](#)), notes the "difficulty in recognizing that this problem exists – even if, in lowe

alternatively, the use of violence to commit electoral fraud through vote buying, ballot rigging, and interfering with voter and candidate registration processes.²¹ 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 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.²²

Violence against women in politics, in contrast, takes place in public **H**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.²³ 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 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 _____ 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.

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.²⁶

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."²⁷ 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

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."³⁰ 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.

These debates highlight ongoing barriers to women's political empowerment. Global discussions have produced a host of different solutions – from consciousness-raising efforts to

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.”³²

Political parties can also take a number of concrete steps to tackle this problem. One is by issuing decl

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

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- ¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015).
- ² Karen Celis et al., "Constituting Women's Interests through Representative Claims," *H* 10 (June 2014): 149-174; Christina Wolbrecht and David E. Campbell, "Leading by Example: Female Members of Parliament as Political Role Models," *J* 51 (October 2007): 921-939; Jennie E. Burnet, "Women Have Found Respect: Gender Quotas, Symbolic Representation, and Female Empowerment in Rwanda," *H* 7 (September 2011): 303-334.
- ³ Nirmal Puwar, *H H H H J* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Alice H. Eagly and

²³ Two-thirds of respondents pointed to members of the same party, while one-third identified family members. See UN Women, (New Delhi: UN Women, 2014), 62.

²⁴ Bots are software applications that can be programmed to post comments automatically.

²⁵ See <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/mar/12/wendy-davis-sxsw-2016-texas-trolls-online-abuse>

²⁶ Gabrielle Bardall, *H H H H H* (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/p15\(s\)5\(oe\)-7\(T1 BT1 0 9r1 0 0 1 326.2194iGal0](http://rpp.pe/p15(s)5(oe)-7(T1 BT1 0 9r1 0 0 1 326.2194iGal0) (w)