

# Violence Against Women in Politics

## A Defense of the Concept

Mona Lena Krook and Juliana Restrepo Sanín\*

**Abstract:** The phenomenon of violence against women in politics is gaining growing and urgent attention from actors around the globe. Piscopo (2016) criticizes emerging theories and strategies to theorize and combat this problem, arguing that scholars have accepted activist definitions at face value, violence against women in politics is simply a subcategory of violence in politics more generally, weak state capacity and criminal justice systems—the result of incomplete democratic consolidation—explain this phenomenon, these acts of violence do not only violate women’s political rights but also other laws, legislation is insufficient given widespread impunity for criminal offenses, and further state actors and policies should be activated to tackle this issue. In response, we argue that nascent academic studies do bring new tools to bear on definitions of this phenomenon. We maintain that violence against women in politics *is* distinct from violence in politics, seeking to prevent women’s participation *as women*. Worryingly, this problem is present in all regions of the world, not just Latin America, although context may influence the content and prevalence of different categories of violent acts. This violence is more than a criminal issue, posing a serious challenge to democracy, human rights, and gender equality—

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\*Mona Lena Krook is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, 89 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901. Tel: +1 848 932 9361. E-mail: m.l.krook@rutgers.edu. Juliana Restrepo Sanín is a graduate student in the Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, 89 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901. Tel: +1 848 932 9361. E-mail: juliana.restreposanin@rutgers.edu

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such that even ineffective laws can play an important normative role in validating these acts as a “problem”. Solutions, finally, should not only be pursued by the state, but instead engage a host of different actors. Although debates continue, we conclude that scholars and activists should *not* abandon the concept of violence against women in politics, but rather, should work together to bring this problem into focus and ensure that men and women are able to participate in politics equally without fear of violence.

*Keywords:* gender, political violence, Latin America.

### *Violencia contra las mujeres en política: En defensa del concepto*

**Resumen:** El fenómeno de la violencia contra las mujeres en la política está ganando cada vez más atención por parte de diversos actores alrededor del mundo. Piscopo (2016) critica teorías y estrategias emergentes para teorizar y combatir este fenómeno, bajo el argumento de que las académicas han aceptado las definiciones de las activistas de manera acrítica, que la violencia contra las mujeres en la política es simplemente una subcategoría de la violencia política en general, que la debilidad del Estado y de los sistemas judiciales (resultado de procesos de consolidación democrática inacabados) explican este fenómeno, que estos actos de violencia no solo violan los derechos políticos de las mujeres sino otras leyes, que la legislación es insuficiente dada la impunidad rampante en cuestiones criminales, y que otros actores y políticas estatales deberían encargarse de este problema. Como respuesta, argumentamos que los recientes estudios académicos sí brindan nuevas herramientas para la creación de definiciones de este fenómeno. Argumentamos que la violencia contra las mujeres en la política *es* distinta de la violencia política puesto que busca impedir la participación de las mujeres *por ser mujeres*. De manera muy preocupante, este problema se presenta en todas las regiones del mundo, no solo en América Latina, aunque el contexto pueda influenciar el tipo y la prevalencia de diferentes actos de violencia. Esta violencia es mucho más que un problema criminal, puesto que pone retos muy grandes a la democracia, los derechos humanos y la igualdad de género —tanto que leyes que no son efectivas, pueden jugar un papel normativo muy importante, calificando estos actos como un “problema”. Finalmente, las soluciones no deberían ser solo propuestas por el Estado, sino involucrar a un sinnúmero de actores distintos. Aunque los debates continúan, concluimos que las académicas y activistas *no* deben abandonar el concepto de violencia contra las mujeres en política, sino, por el contrario, deben trabajar juntas para llamar la atención sobre este problema y asegurarse que tanto hombres como mujeres puedan participar en política sin temor a la violencia.

*Palabras clave:* género, violencia política, América Latina.

In the months since we wrote our article, Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016), actors around the world have paid growing attention to the phenomenon of “violence against women in politics” —or, “political violence and harassment against women”, as the issue is known more commonly in Latin America. In this short period of time, significant momentum has been building at the regional level to recognize and combat this problem. In February 2015, the Inter-American Commission on Women and Organiza-

tion of American States (OAS) convened an expert meeting and roundtable on political violence and harassment of women as a hemispheric challenge (Organization of American States, 2015). Six months later, states-parties to the Belém do Pará Convention (the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (1994)) endorsed a “Declaration on Political Violence and Harassment against Women” (Mesecevi, 2015), calling on various actors—including electoral authorities, political parties, civil society organizations, and media and social media outlets—to develop programs, studies, public policies, and awareness-raising campaigns to help prevent, punish, and sanction political violence and harassment against women. After the issue was identified as a top concern at the 2014 gathering of the Group of Women Parliamentarians of ParlAmericas (the network of the national legislatures of OAS member States), the group agreed to an Action Plan for Preventing Political Harassment and Violence Against Women at its 2015 meeting (ParlAmericas, 2015), followed by the launch in March 2016 of an on-line portal to map gender-based political harassment, featuring testimonies from female parliamentarians across the region (ParlAmericas, 2016).

Concerns about violence against women in politics have also increased outside Latin America. Trainings, seminars, and studies have been initiated by various regional offices of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA).<sup>1</sup> Inspired by research from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) inaugurated a program to raise awareness and monitor violence against women in elections (National Democratic Institute, 2015). In March 2016, NDI convened an event in New York coinciding with the meetings of the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women to launch a Global Call to Action to Stop Violence Against Women in Politics, with testimonies and perspectives from all regions of the world (National Democratic Institute, 2016). An issue brief on violence against women in parliament, based on surveys and interviews with male and female parliamentarians, is currently being prepared by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which is also drafting a resolution on the issue to be put to a vote at the IPU Assembly in October 2016.<sup>2</sup> UN Women, finally, is developing a handbook with gender-sensitive indicators to measure violence against

<sup>1</sup> Interviews in Tunisia, September 2015, and Mexico, November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with IPU staff, March 2016.

women in elections, focusing on the role of gender norms and discrimination in shaping opportunities for women's political participation.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of violence against women in politics is thus gaining ground globally, especially among activists and practitioners. Academic work on this topic is still nascent, however, with most scholarly studies to date focusing on developments in Latin America (Albaine, 2009; Albaine, 2015; Archenti and Albaine, 2013; Cerva Cerna, 2014; Krook and Restrepo Sanín, 2016). We therefore welcome Piscopo's (2016) critical assessment of our article, as well as the opportunity to respond, as we are able to address misinterpretations regarding our argument. Our response, however, also seeks to go beyond our original article by incorporating our subsequent thinking, informed by seminar discussions, conversations, readings, news items, and original interviews conducted over the past year.

Piscopo's (2016) excellent and engaging essay offers a series of criticisms of our article—and, by extension, much of the existing and nascent scholarly research and activism on violence against women in politics in Latin America (some of which she elides with our argument). Adopting a more skeptical lens, Piscopo calls on scholars and activists to pause for reflection to examine shortcomings in emerging theories and strategies. She makes six claims: 1) we, and other scholars of this phenomenon, have uncritically accepted activist definitions of political violence and harassment against women; 2) the “new” phenomenon of violence against women in politics can be subsumed under, or explained by, violence against politicians and violence in society more generally; 3) shortcomings in state capacity and criminal justice systems play a major role in shaping political and gendered violence, connecting violence against women in politics more to imperfect processes of democratic consolidation than to backlash against female politicians; 4) violence against women in politics is not only an electoral crime, but, in some cases, a criminal offense; 5) legislation on this issue is not sufficient if there is a culture of impunity and non-implementation; and 6) state strategies to combat this phenomenon should include the creation of new state agencies, like special prosecutors' offices, and the passage of other types of legislation, especially on sexual harassment in the workplace.

While carefully developed and thoroughly discussed, we argue that many of these criticisms are misplaced—in some cases, due to misreading

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with UN Women staff, August 2015.

our argument, and in others, stemming from an exclusive focus on developments in Latin America. First, research on this topic has indeed been inspired by the work of female politicians and activists on the ground, using their understandings as a starting point for analyzing this phenomenon. Our work, however, then mobilizes scholarly literatures in history, political science, sociology, and psychology to theorize what violence against women in politics *is* and why it occurs—leading us to argue that the activist focus on physical, sexual, and psychological violence should be expanded to include the concepts of economic and symbolic violence. Second, we maintain that violence against women in politics *is* a separate phenomenon from violence against politicians and violence in society more generally. While the latter may certainly be directed at women, the former entails the distinct motivation of seeking to restrict the political participation of women *as women*—thereby making it a distinct form of violence, affecting not only the individual victim, but seeking to communicate to women and to society that *women as a group* should not take part.

Third, violence against women in politics is a problem in all regions of the world—not only Latin America—and appears to have increased, or gained more attention, in recent years as the share of women in elected and appointed positions has grown. Contextual factors, however, do appear to influence the content of violent acts, as well as which types of violence are most prevalent. Fourth, while activists in Latin America have framed violence against women in politics as an electoral crime, these acts do certainly have criminal dimensions. But violence against women in politics also poses a serious challenge to democracy, human rights, and gender equality. Fifth, legislation can be valuable even if there is little implementation, as a law establishes that the behavior in question is wrong—validating violence against women in politics as a “problem” and empowering victims in their efforts to gain some measure of justice, however imperfect. Sixth, state-based solutions offer but one means to combat violence against women in politics. We emphasize that multi-faceted strategies are required, engaging a host of actors—including parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups—to tackle the many forms that acts of violence against women in politics may take.

We conclude, on the basis of this discussion, that activists and scholars—in Latin America and beyond—should *not* abandon the concept of violence against women in politics. Rather, further conceptual work—as well as empirical studies and data collection—should be encouraged as actors around the world seek to understand and grapple with this problem. Im-

perative to these efforts, we argue, is fostering the idea that violence against women in politics is not “politics as usual” or simply the “cost of doing politics”, as implied by Piscopo (2016). Academics and practitioners should work together to prevent violence against women in politics, creating new norms of behavior that “denaturalize” this violence and render it unacceptable; treat violence against women in politics, developing services and protocols for assisting survivors; and punish violence against women in politics, imposing sanctions—legal or otherwise—on perpetrators.<sup>4</sup> As noted by Madeleine Albright in an opinion piece published on International Women’s Day in 2016, “When 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” (Albright, 2016).

### **Activism and Academic Research on Political Violence and Harassment**

Although women in politics have long faced problems of aggression, coercion, and intimidation (see more on this below), the concept of violence against women in politics is relatively recent, surfacing in only the last ten to fifteen years in different 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 next 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. They identified a host of acts of violence and harassment that seek, as their central motivation, to shorten, suspend, impede or restrict the exercise of a woman’s political position, or to induce a woman, against her will, to do (or not do) something related to her political mandate.

Outside Latin America, through a project coordinated by South Asia Partnership International—resulting in several books and 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

<sup>4</sup> For some ideas for different sectors, see NDI’s Global Call to Action to Stop Violence Against Women in Politics (National Democratic Institute, 2016).

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (South Asia Partnership International, 2009). 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 (South Asia Partnership International, 2006). "Violence against women in elections" appears to be a slightly newer concept, 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 in a 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—directed at someone because of her gender seeking to undermine, delay or otherwise influence an electoral process" (National Democratic Institute, 2015).

Parallel discussions taking place in different parts of the world indicate shared attempts to come to grips with what is seen to be an emerging global problem. Defining the exact contours of what it *is*—and, indeed, what it should be called—is still an ongoing process. Feminist activists and scholars have long recognized that "naming" an issue can be both personally and politically important, as it can help marginalized individuals better comprehend their own experiences and realize that they share these experiences with others. It can also raise awareness among members of dominant groups regarding their own actions that they may not realize are unjust (Flood and Pease, 2009; Friedan, 1963; Jaggar, 1989). Political scientists also view concept formation to be a necessary first step when analyzing any political phenomenon, with (the lack of) robust definitions affecting the ability to collect accurate data, perform useful analyses, and develop concrete policy solutions (Goertz, 2006; Sartori, 1970).

Feminist research often begins from women's lives, using their experiences and perspectives as a starting point for theorizing (Harding, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2014). It is not surprising, therefore, that scholars writing on violence against women in politics in Latin America have been inspired by activist debates and definitions. Indeed, some academics—notably Cerva Cerna (2014)—have played a role in bringing together politicians, activists, and academics to illuminate the contours of this phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> None of

<sup>5</sup> Another example is the international seminar on "Violencia política contra las mujeres en América Latina: diagnósticos, diálogos y estrategias", organized at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in November 2015.

this work, however, uncritically takes “activists’ definitions at face value”, as Piscopo (2016) suggests. In our case, we extend these conversations by incorporating insights from scholarly literatures on violence against women and political and electoral violence, together with a wide range of empirical examples gleaned from NGO reports, bills and laws, and news items, to engage in further theorizing that seeks to re-orient the understandings of activists. As part of this process, we have presented our ideas to a wide range of academic and practitioner audiences working in many different regions of the world, with these critical engagements leading to mutual adjustments in understanding.

This path of discovery has directed us to a host of scholarly literatures that converged in generating our interpretation of what violence against women in politics is and why it occurs. Inspired by early feminist theorists (Elshtain, 1981; Landes, 1988), we draw on the historical association in many societies between men and the “public sphere” of politics and the economy, and women and the “private sphere” of home and the family to observe that efforts to promote women’s political participation —by their very nature— challenge beliefs and practices regarding politics as a male domain. Like other forms of violence against women, violence against women in politics thus serves as a form of gender role enforcement (Donat and D’Emilio, 1992), an argument bolstered by studies in psychology and sociology showing substantial hostility towards women in leadership roles (Puar, 2004; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Our article argued, further, that economic and symbolic forms of violence have been overlooked, or obscured, in the current activist focus on physical, sexual, and psychological violence.

Piscopo (2016) misses this contribution because she mistakes economic and symbolic violence to be sub-categories of psychological violence —leading her to assert, in turn, that we seek to criminalize practices of “institutionalized sexism”. To be clear, economic and symbolic violence cannot be reduced to simple sexism: they involve attempts at coercive control by restricting women’s access to economic resources (Stark, 2007) and the denigration or erasure of women as political actors through portrayals and representations casting them as “lesser” than men (Bourdieu, 2001). While some criminal codes recognize economic violence,<sup>6</sup> gaining recourse for acts of symbolic violence is complicated by free speech protections. Al-

<sup>6</sup> For country data, see World Bank Group (2016).



though freedom of speech is a central element in a healthy democratic society, we argue—similar to scholars of hate crimes—that some behaviors cross over into acts of violence when they target victims due to their identity, using mechanisms of power and oppression to affirm threatened hierarchies in order to deny equal access to rights by group members (Iganski, 2001; Perry, 2001). Due to these dynamics, we suggest that legal reforms cannot address all acts of violence against women in politics, requiring additional strategies on the part of both state and non-state actors.

### **Violence Towards Politicians Versus Violence Against Women in Politics**

Although the concept of violence against women in politics is relatively new, the phenomenon it describes is not (Albaine, 2014). In the 1950s, for example, rivals of Coya Knutson, a Congresswoman from Minnesota, wrote and circulated a letter to journalists from her estranged husband, stating that he was “sick and tired of having [her] run around with other men all the time and not [her] husband” and urging her to “come home.” Despite its false claims, the letter had a devastating impact on her re-election campaign, causing her to lose her seat (Beito, 1990). If the concept focuses on women as political actors more broadly (the approach of IFES, NDI, and UN Women), historical precedents include violence faced by female suffrage campaigners, especially more radical suffragettes, who were attacked by angry mobs, imprisoned and force-fed and, in some cases, had their children removed (Graham, 1983; Harrison, 1978).<sup>7</sup> Similar visceral reactions transpire when women have entered other previously all-male spaces, with women in the military, for example, facing high rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment from their own colleagues (Katzenstein, 1998; Nelson, 2002).

The nature of these acts—which are fundamentally about restricting women’s participation *as women*—cannot be subsumed under, or explained by, violence against politicians and violence in society more generally, as Piscopo (2016) suggests. In her view, what Latin American activists and scholars call “violence against women in politics” is simply a manifestation of rampant violence across the region, combined with a general absence of the rule of law. We agree that general insecurity plays a role in exacerbating incidences of violence against women in politics. However, we disagree

<sup>7</sup> The ever-present threat of physical violence led Britain suffragettes to teach themselves jujitsu for self-defense. See Ruz and Parkinson (2015).

strongly with the notion that these acts only emerge from a context of imperfect democratic consolidation (see more on this below). Moreover, we do not claim that every violent act committed against a female politician (or female political actor more generally) constitutes violence against women in politics, nor do we deny that women may also commit such acts against other women. For us, the crucial difference relates to the *motive* behind the violence, in particular whether it seeks to send a message to women—and to society—that *women as a group* should not participate in politics. Our concept thus does not encompass all acts of violence experienced by female politicians—but rather, aggression, coercion, and intimidation against women as political actors, *due to the fact that they are women*.

To make this argument clearer, Table 1 contrasts “violence in politics” (a symptom of high rates of violence in society) with “violence against women in politics”. What the table shows is that while the latter is related to, and shares some features with, the former, there are crucial differences across the two in terms of perpetrators, spaces, motivations, timing, and forms of violence. For Piscopo (2016), violence against women in politics occurs only in public spaces, at the hands of political opponents and criminal delinquents. As such, it is not surprising that she equates this with violence in politics more generally. Our definition (and, indeed, the one shared by all activists and scholars working on this issue) emphasizes that these acts can take place in both public and private spaces, with many—if not the majority—of perpetrators being women’s own party colleagues and family members. The result is that, in addition to facing attacks in insecure environments, women may also face danger in spaces that are usually safe for men: political assemblies, official events, their offices, and even their own homes.

This distinction can be further illustrated through several real world cases. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 exemplifies violence in politics involving a female politician. The first female prime minister of Pakistan (1988-1990 and 1993-1996), Bhutto returned to Pakistan from exile to contest the 2008 parliamentary elections after forging a power-sharing agreement with then-President Pervez Musharraf. At a rally upon her homecoming, she narrowly survived an assassination attempt, which killed more than 130 people. After several failed attempts to enhance security for her campaign, from both Musharraf’s government and a variety of private sources, she was killed during an explosion following a campaign rally. Although an Al-Qaeda commander claimed responsibility, Bhutto herself had accused the government of a plot to assassinate her as

**TABLE 1.** Violence in Politics versus Violence Against Women in Politics

	<b>Violence in politics</b>	<b>Violence against women in politics</b>
<b>Who</b>	Opponents in other political parties, criminal gangs	Opponents in other parties, criminal gangs; but also members of a woman's own party, her family and friends, executive branch, civil servants, media and social media commentators, police and military forces
<b>Where</b>	Public sphere	Public and private spheres
<b>When</b>	During and around elections	During and around elections; during early preparations for elections and after women have taken their seats
<b>Why</b>	To alter election results, by preventing a group from voting or coercing electoral outcomes	To prevent women from exercising their political rights and, by extension, to communicate more broadly that women do not belong in politics
<b>How</b>	Physical and psychological violence, for example (threats of) murder, kidnapping, incarceration	Physical and psychological violence; but also sexual, economic, and symbolic violence, for example rape, public stripping, stalking, character assassination, destruction of campaign materials, on-line harassment and abuse

*Source:* Own elaboration.

early as two months before, and many of her supporters have continued to make similar claims in the years following her death. Although there were discussions in Pakistan in the late 1980s regarding the right of a woman to serve as national leader, the issue was resolved by religious leaders prior to her first election (Zakaria, 1990), and the evidence suggests that Bhutto was killed for political reasons, not because she was female.

The 2012 assassination of Juana Quispe, a local council member in Bolivia, offers a contrasting example of violence against women in politics. Like several male members of her party, she was critical of the mayor but, as a woman, she was specifically singled out for mistreatment. After being elected, Quispe was harassed to resign by the mayor, his supporters, and various council members. When she did not, they changed the times of the meetings and refused her entrance to the sessions. When this failed, they suspended her from her position. When she was reinstated after a seven-month legal battle, she was denied the salary from the time she was sus-

pending, on the pretext that she was not present during the council sessions. One month later, she was found murdered (Acobol, 2010; Corz, 2012). The experiences of other Bolivian female politicians offer further evidence of this phenomenon. It is not uncommon, for example, for male *suplentes*, designated alternates if office-holders are unable to fulfill their duties, to insist that their female counterparts in office should share their salaries and resign half-way through their terms in favor of the men—pressures categorically not faced by male politicians.<sup>8</sup>

A similar distinction can be drawn in relation to female voters. Following disputed elections in Kenya in 2007 and 2008, youths allied with different ethnic groups launched a campaign culminating in more than 1000 deaths and the displacement of more than half a million people. Officials estimate that at least 900 cases of sexual violence occurred, with women being targeted due to their ethnicity (Mutiga, 2016). In early 2015, President Uhuru Kenya announced a fund to provide “restorative justice”, but according to Human Rights Watch (2016), the vast majority of this money has gone to displaced people and not to those who suffered sexual violence. Despite these gendered experiences of electoral violence, the motivations were not to keep women *per se* out of politics, thus reflecting a case of violence in politics.

In comparison, elections in Afghanistan in 2004 were marred by various instances of violence against women as political actors. Women faced intimidation when attempting to register to vote, with warlords in some areas pushing religious authorities to issue directives preventing women from being placed on the voter rolls. According to a survey, moreover, nearly 90 per cent of Afghans believed that women needed the permission of their husbands or families to vote—permission that was rarely forthcoming. A bus carrying female election workers was bombed, killing or injuring many on board, and women who did come to vote on election day often found that female polling stations—an innovation intended to encourage women’s participation—were left unstaffed or were closed due to threats of violence (Human Rights Watch, 2004). In all of these incidents, the intention of real and threatened violence was to restrict women’s opportunities *as women* to participate, making it a clear case of violence against women in the political sphere.

The contrast between these two types of violence, however, is sometimes blurred. As we write in our article, the means for attacking women

<sup>8</sup> Interviews in Bolivia, August 2015.

often relies on gendered scripts, focusing on women's bodies and traditional social roles to deny or undercut their competence in politics—for example, via rape threats and questions about their sexual identity or morality (Bardall, 2013; Herrera, Arias, and García, 2011). In our view, such claims and insinuations can evolve into a case of violence against women in politics when such images and stereotypes are employed to suggest that women *per se* do not belong in the political realm—going beyond the criticism of a specific woman to communicate the broader message that women as a group should not participate in politics. Our acknowledgement of this “gray zone” leads Piscopo (2016) to argue that we subsume “general” electoral or political violence into our definition of violence against women in politics, when in fact we signal that the “real world” does not always permit quick categorization—requiring a closer look to determine the motivation and message of particular forms of political violence towards women.

Evidence from around the world lends support for our approach, revealing that violence against women in politics is real and can have harmful effects on women's rates of political participation. In Peru, nearly half of all female mayors and local council members have reported acts of violence related to their political positions (Quintanilla, 2012). This violence is demoralizing, making female politicians less likely to stand for reelection and to leave after fewer terms served. One-third of female local politicians in Sweden, for example, said they considered giving up their positions as a result of these incidents (Krantz, Wallin and Wallin, 2012), while 48 per cent of the women leaving office in Bolivia in 2010 reported being victims of such violence (Acobol, 2012). The impact of this violence also extends beyond the women who are directly affected. In Australia, 60 per cent of women aged 18 to 21 and 80 per cent of women over 31 said they were less likely to run for office after seeing how negatively the female prime minister was treated (Shepherd, 2014), while nearly all participants in a program for aspiring women leaders in the UK had witnessed sexist abuse of female politicians online, leading over 75 per cent of them to say it was a concern when considering whether or not to pursue a role in public life (Campbell and Lovenduski, 2016).

## Contexts and Manifestations of Violence Against Women in Politics

As the examples above indicate, violence against women in politics is not limited to Latin America, casting doubt on Piscopo's (2016) claim that political violence and harassment towards women stems more from incom-

plete processes of democratic consolidation in the region than to patriarchal resistance to women's political participation. It is simply not true that violence against women in politics is a problem restricted to developing countries where state capacity is weak: acts of this nature also appear in developed societies where the state is strong enough to enforce the law and violence is not routinized. In Italy, the female speaker of parliament has divulged the graphic photos and threats she has received since assuming her post (Davies, 2014), while the Norwegian prime minister appeared on a television program discussing on-line abuse towards her as a female politician (The Local, 2015). In the UK, various female members of parliament have received rape threats over Twitter, including a case that went to trial (Creasy, 2014), and in February 2016, a Muslim women's organization sent a letter to the Labour Party leader, reporting tactics being employed to prevent Muslim women from becoming candidates, including abuse, insults, and pressures on their families to force them to withdraw from politics (The Guardian, 2016). Similarly, an insider in Australia recently decried problems of sexual harassment in parliament, occurring across all parties, with a "toxic culture" preventing any type of disciplinary action against perpetrators (Faruqi, 2016).

Viewing these cases together, however, it becomes apparent that while differences in state capacity do not affect the existence of violence against women in politics *per se*, they might influence the prevailing means used to attack women. More specifically, in countries where violence is routine, it may be "easier" to use physical, sexual, and psychological violence because of impunity and the ability to hide behind claims about "general insecurity". Conversely, in countries in which such forms of violence are highly condemned and the state has the means to punish perpetrators, symbolic forms of violence may be preferred, achieving the desired effects while being more difficult to prove—with high levels of state capacity, ironically, providing stronger guarantees regarding the right to free speech, which might be mobilized to permit and defend this behavior (Creasy, 2014).

Attending to the importance of context, consequently, involves recognizing that distinct cultures may provide different "tools" for committing acts of violence against women in politics, 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, for example, can be especially devastating in a small rural community, where families share a dense network of social ties, or in cultures where a woman's "ho-

nor” is seen as an extension of her family. Conversely, perpetrating acts of violence against women in politics via social media has greater resonance in contexts where citizens have widespread access to computers and cell phones. Although the tools may vary, the goals are nonetheless the same: to prevent women’s political participation through efforts to intimidate, delegitimize, or exclude women as political actors.

Dispensing with “Latin American exceptionalism” raises questions, in turn, regarding the reasons behind increased interest in this phenomenon across the world. As Piscopo (2016) correctly observes, scholars working in the region associate expanded election opportunities for women with the apparent rise in violence (Albaine, 2014; Archenti and Albaine, 2013; Cerva Cerna, 2014). We do not make a similar causal connection in our article, although it is a question that we have pondered. Global data provide incontrovertible evidence that women have made major strides in political representation over the last twenty years, with the world average of women in national parliaments nearly doubling between 1995 and 2015 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015). In our view, at least three scenarios are possible: 1) more women in the political realm may be simply creating more sites of potential violence, with more women available to attack; 2) 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; and 3) greater discussion of 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.

Our research suggests, however, that backlash, if not the *only explanation*, is certainly a *very large motivation* behind rising violence against women in politics. Case studies of gender quotas, for example, are replete with insidious, and often creative, tactics devised by elites to flout the spirit and/or the letter of these regulations, drawing on gendered norms and practices preserving male dominance of political life (Krook, 2016). Further evidence can be seen in the fact that many perpetrators globally are members of the same party as the victims in question, seeking to replace the women in office with men from the same political group. Acts of this nature take on greater urgency with enhanced opportunities for women to fill political roles. Activists and scholars thus do not believe that violence only occurs when women enter the political arena, as Piscopo (2016) claims. Rather, the intuition seems to be—echoing the findings of Yoder (1991)—

that these dynamics get set in motion as women's numbers (threaten to) rise in perceptible ways. Because this is the ostensible goal of quota policies, it is thus not surprising that countries where quotas are introduced may also be those where violence is more pronounced.

### The "Problem" of Violence Against Women in Politics

Violence against women in politics is problematic for a number of reasons. Most obviously, it poses a direct threat to women's ability and willingness to engage in politics. Although data collection on this issue is in its infancy, the available evidence suggests in unambiguous terms that female political actors around the world have experienced such violence, with implications for their ability and willingness to participate actively in the political process.<sup>9</sup> Although many women hesitated to speak out directly about these issues, a subtle shift appears to be underway in terms of female politicians acknowledging this problem. At a side event sponsored by the IPU at the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women meetings in 2013, for example, our presentation on the concept to a room of female politicians from around the world was met with vigorous nodding from a large portion of participants. Many immediately grasp the concept when it is explained to them,<sup>10</sup> and even if they deny being victims themselves, they acknowledge that it occurs to other women (Cerva Cerna, 2014).

These dynamics constitute a violation of women's rights to political participation, enshrined in a host of international commitments and national legislation. Article 7 of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979), 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. Similar statements are found in the UN's Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995), Millennium Development Goals (United Na-

<sup>9</sup> Interviews in France, June 2014; Mexico, May and July 2014; Brazil, December 2014; Bolivia, August 2015; Tunisia, September 2015; Jordan, September 2015; United Kingdom, January 2016. See also data discussed above.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews in Mexico, May and July 2014.



tions, 2000), and Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), all calling for women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership. At the same time, constitutions in more than 150 countries explicitly guarantee men and women equal rights to political participation and association (UN Women, 2016).

Framing the issue in terms of women's political rights, as Piscopo (2016) notes, is the favored interpretation among activists and politicians in Latin America. This focus makes sense, on the one hand, due to the ability to draw on the extensive commitments made by Latin American governments to highlight shortcomings between rhetoric and reality and call on states to take steps to ensure women's political rights. On the other hand, the emphasis on violence against women in politics as an electoral crime also reflects the most politically expedient approach, given that electoral courts—in contrast to other state-level institutions—have proven to be strong and effective defenders of gender equality, as Piscopo (2015) finds in other research. This way of framing the issue, however, has its limitations, as Piscopo (2016) notes, because electoral tribunals cannot provide justice for criminal violations—nor can other state institutions either, for the most part, due to widespread impunity for acts of violence. We very much agree with this observation, and as we write in our article (and more below), the solution is a multi-sector approach, with a variety of actors working together to fill these gaps.

Gaining support for such a broad-based initiative hinges on connecting violence against women in politics to values important to society as a whole. In our view, this phenomenon *is* multiple problems simultaneously. First, violence against women in politics undermines democracy. Preventing female voters from accessing polling stations reduces the integrity of elections, if one sector of the population is systematically excluded from exercising their political rights. Threatening or harassing female activists and party members prevents women as a group from contributing to political debates and informing policy priorities. Pressuring women to resign after they have been elected to office, or making it overly difficult or impossible to do their job, violates women's rights to participate and infringe upon the rights of voters, as electoral results are effectively nullified in favor of forces of intimidation and coercion.

Second, violence against women in politics breaches women's human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) defines "human rights" in terms of the "dignity and worth of the hu-

man person”. Article 21 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. Acts of violence intended to exclude women or suppress their participation thus disrespect human dignity and equal rights by refusing to recognize women as equal citizens. The IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians, established in 1976, provides a precedent for thinking about this issue along these lines, using the language of “human rights” when investigating different acts—including undue exclusion from political office, arbitrary arrest, restriction of speech, murder, torture, and kidnapping—consistent with behaviors witnessed around the world to prevent women’s political participation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016).

Third, violence against women in politics is a form of sex—and gender—based discrimination. Article 1 of CEDAW, signed by 189 states-parties, 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” (United Nations, 1979). The International Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (United Nations, 1993) explicitly defines violence against women as a form of sex-based discrimination, as a “manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women”, leading to “domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women”. Viewed in these terms, violence against women in politics can be understood as a form of discrimination against women in the political realm, restricting and impeding access to rights and freedoms on the basis of sex and seeking to maintain unequal power relations between men and women.

## Legislation Versus Implementation of Laws Against Violence

Enacting legislation is often a cumbersome process, requiring sustained efforts on the part of its sponsors to draft bills, cultivate support, and seek windows of opportunity for policy reform (Kingdon, 1984). Despite the

work involved, various literatures in political science suggest that politicians can and do pass policies that they believe will have little impact, including signing international conventions they have no intention of respecting (Leff, 1988; Mazur, 1995; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Yet the insincerity of a reform does not necessarily preclude effective implementation. Moreover, naming a phenomenon and deeming it unacceptable—even if the negative behavior continues, unabated—can have powerful normative implications (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink, 1999). This is because a new law provides a heretofore unavailable resource for actors on the ground to make claims vis-à-vis the state to protect those rights.

Activists across Latin America are well aware of these dynamics, acknowledging—as Piscopo (2016) argues—that transforming the social, cultural, and political cultures that cause violence against women in politics would be ideal, but would likely take a long time to be realized. In the meantime, legislation can provide a necessary first step in the right direction.<sup>11</sup> According to women in Bolivia, the awareness-raising element of the country's law on political violence and harassment against women should not be underestimated. Prior to the law, many women believed that these issues were simply the “cost of doing politics”, not realizing that their political rights were being violated or how they could take steps to address the problem. Having a law has given them vocabulary to describe their experiences—as well as motivated them to address this problem in programs to train and support female politicians, thus breaking the silence around violence and taking practical steps to mitigate its impact.<sup>12</sup>

For Piscopo (2016), the best way forward is to bolster the implementation of existing laws on violence against women, as well as to pass legislation on sexual harassment in the workplace (see more on this below). Efforts to address violence against women in politics, however, need not be limited to legal reforms. In June 2015, an all-party committee in the Canadian House of Commons issued a report outlining a process for handling sexual harassment complaints, sparked by the realization that there was no formal process to deal with these issues after two female parliamentarians claimed in November 2014 that they had been sexually harassed by two male MPs from another party. The report also stated that all parliamentarians should receive training in the new code of conduct and take a pledge that

<sup>11</sup> Virtual interview in Costa Rica, April 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews in Bolivia, August 2015.

condemns sexual harassment (Walters, 2015). Recognizing the need for a similar type of policy at the party level, the British Labour Party has adopted rules to prevent sexism, racism, and bullying in meetings, making clear what standards of behavior they expect from party members and leaders (Cooper, 2015). Other types of rules, in other words, can contribute to building up a broader normative framework condemning such behaviors and raising awareness that such acts are “wrong” and need to change.

### **Multi-sector Strategies to Combat Violence Against Women in Politics**

Violence against women in politics is a problem with many dimensions, affecting women engaged in various political roles and involving a range of different behaviors. Like violence against women in general, therefore, it cannot be solved using only one set of strategies but, rather, requires a more holistic and comprehensive approach involving interventions at a host of different levels (Heise, 1998).<sup>13</sup> Piscopo (2016) outlines some innovative ideas for tackling violence against women in politics in Latin America, arguing that much of the necessary infrastructure already exists between legislation on violence against women and electoral courts ready to defend women’s political rights—the missing policy element being laws to address sexual harassment in the workplace. She proposes that further institutional reforms might include special prosecutors to receive and address complaints regarding physical assault and psychological harassment; training and sensitization programs for officers at the region’s women’s police stations; government taskforces to coordinate law enforcement and court officials to prosecute cases under existing criminal statutes and laws on violence against women; and ombudspersons in electoral tribunals to document and investigate claims.

We think that these are all excellent ideas to pursue, assuming commitment on the part of governments to tackle this problem. However, these proposals are also limited in two crucial ways. First, the recommendation that existing legislation be used as a basis for prosecuting acts of violence against women in politics ignores the fact that elected officials are often protected by immunity provisions, making it impossible to pursue claims

<sup>13</sup> The same is true of efforts to elect and empower women in politics more broadly (Krook and Norris, 2014).

about sexual harassment, for example, perpetrated by a deputy.<sup>14</sup> This approach also overlooks additional, relatively minor steps that can be taken to strengthen existing legislation. The Superior Electoral Tribunal in Bolivia, for example, decided that it would only accept resignations from local councilors in person at the national office in La Paz—making it impossible for male *suplentes* to present a resignation letter from a female office-holder who was forced to sign a blank paper when she was first elected.<sup>15</sup> Another idea is to require that *suplentes* be of the same sex as the *propietario*, guaranteeing that if a woman resigns she is replaced by another woman—thus removing possibilities for coercion on the part of men seeking to push women out of office.<sup>16</sup>

Second, these proposed solutions focus exclusively on state actors, overlooking other groups of actors who might be mobilized to tackle this problem. Piscopo (2016) implicitly acknowledges this idea by alluding to differences in jurisdiction that make some actors more appropriate than others in terms of responding to different kinds of violence. We would add that various types of actors also bring with them distinct resources for preventing, treating, and punishing violence against women in politics.<sup>17</sup>

Global and regional organizations might integrate violence against women in politics into existing international instruments; draft an international accord or declaration on ending this violence; establish regional protocols or model guidelines offering guidance to parties and/or parliaments in tackling this problem; facilitate information sharing on data and strategies for combating violence against women in politics; place the issue on the agenda of international meetings; and exchange data, documents, experiences, and challenges in combatting violence.

Governments might conduct awareness-raising campaigns directed at parties and voters to highlight the problem through posters, websites, tweets, on-line videos and television spots; create procedures for registering and handling complaints through new or existing state agencies, including police stations, electoral authorities, or gender equality offices; designate a state agency to serve as a primary point of contact for victims of violence against women in politics and their families; develop indicators

<sup>14</sup> Interviews in Bolivia, August 2015; virtual interview in Costa Rica, April 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Interview in Bolivia, August 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Interviews in Argentina, August 2014; interviews in Mexico, July 2014.

<sup>17</sup> For a more comprehensive list, see NDI's Global Call to Action to Stop Violence Against Women in Politics (National Democratic Institute, 2016).

and collect data on the prevalence, form, and impact of violence against women in politics; and provide training to law enforcement officials to enable them to recognize such acts, reporting and prosecuting these crimes to the fullest extent of the law.

Parliaments might organize a national forum in parliament on violence against women in politics, inviting locally elected women as well as women in parties and women's civil society organizations; introduce a resolution condemning violence against women in politics in all its forms; incorporate violence against women in politics into existing state laws and frameworks; consider legislative reforms; conduct a confidential survey of parliamentarians' experiences with electoral and political violence, including incidents occurring within parliament; establish or revise parliamentary codes of conduct to address aspects of institutional culture that create a hostile work environment for female parliamentarians and staff; and provide training for parliamentarians to raise awareness about their own conduct, as well as the resources available for responding to acts of violence.

Political parties might organize sessions at annual party assemblies, as well as distribute materials to party members, including posters, websites, tweets, and online videos to explain what violence against women in politics is; approve a party-level resolution condemning violence against women in politics in all its forms; develop a party code of conduct for executive and rank-and-file members to prohibit sexism or bullying in meetings, as well as sexual harassment in all contexts of party work; reform party statutes or policies to impose sanctions on members who commit acts of violence against women in politics; establish a party-level body responsible for receiving complaints from victims and recommending sanctions against perpetrators; make a public pledge, independently or with other parties, to ensure the safety and security of women in elections; and sign a cross-party declaration defining violence against women in politics as unacceptable.


Civil society groups might organize consciousness-raising efforts with female voters, activists, and candidates to introduce them to the concept of violence against women in politics; develop a network of elected women across the country to raise awareness and build pressure for reform; provide services to victims, including call centers and referral systems; and create score cards for parties rating them on how well they respect women's rights to participate in politics without fear of violence. Female leaders can add to these efforts by sharing their personal stories and creating networks to gen-

erate momentum for change; participating in training and mentoring programs for female candidates with coping strategies for responding to and mitigating acts of violence against women in politics; and participating in networks to develop shared concepts of violence against women in politics and work toward greater public awareness. Both civil society groups and individual politicians might use social media as a platform for exposing acts of violence, for example by posting photos of defaced offices or screenshots of rape threats, to draw attention to the problem and its various manifestations, while also calling out perpetrators for their unacceptable behavior.

Members of the justice and security sectors might create protocols for responding to victims of violence against women in politics; establish procedures for registering and handling complaints; raise awareness regarding legislation and other legal tools that might be mobilized to tackle this problem; and provide training to police officers to help them recognize and respond to complaints. Electoral observers and authorities might revise electoral management body rules and regulation to define and respond to acts of violence against women in politics; mobilize civil society actors to assist in election monitoring, for example through telephone hotlines, text messaging systems, and web-based applications; create procedures for registering and handling complaints; and incorporate a gender perspective in electoral observation guidelines to recognize acts of violence against women in politics. The media sector, finally, might provide training for journalists to enhance gender-sensitivity in media coverage; partner with civil society organizations and technology companies to develop mechanisms to deal with online abuse; and harness social media as a tool to publicize and condemn acts of violence against women in politics, using public scrutiny to bring pressure to bear on perpetrators. Viewed together, these strategies suggest that a host of different actors can—and should—be engaged to combat violence against women in politics.

## Conclusions and the Way Forward

Violence against women in politics is a serious problem, but activists and scholars around the world are still coming to terms with what this phenomenon *is*—and, indeed, even what it should be called. A growing consensus, however, is that these acts should not simply be brushed away as an inevitable part of “politics as usual”. Rather, supporters emphatically believe that violence is not the cost of participating in politics (NDI, 2016). Attending

to this dynamics, rather, 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. Tackling violence against women in politics can thus play a crucial role in developing democratic culture, institutions, and practice—not the other way around, as Piscopo (2016) argues. Growing global momentum behind this issue suggests that these conversations will continue into the future, however, as interested parties work together—and at times disagree—on the best concepts and solutions for ending this pernicious problem, with the goal of ensuring that men and women are able to participate on equal terms without the fear of violence. 

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