

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Violence against Women in Politics: Theory, Data, and Methods

Violence against Women in Politics: A Rising Global Trend

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Recent years have witnessed a troubling rise in reports of assault, intimidation, and abuse directed at politically active women. The United Nations General Assembly first called for zero tolerance for violence against female candidates and elected officials in Resolution 66/130 in 2011. In 2012, Bolivia became the first country in the world to criminalize political violence and harassment against women, in response to a more than decade-long campaign by locally elected women to document the numerous injuries and abuses they confronted. Resonating across the region, this development led the states parties to the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women to endorse a Declaration on Political Violence and Harassment against Women in 2015.

In 2016 and 2017, action on this issue began to accelerate. The National Democratic Institute launched the #NotTheCost campaign (<https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>), accompanied by a suite of tools to observe violence against women in elections, assist political parties in tackling this issue, and document violent incidents against politically active women. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) undertook the first global study of sexism, violence, and harassment against women parliamentarians, the Organization of American States (2017) published a model law to combat violence against women in political life, and UN Women together with the United Nations Development Programme (2017) released a programming guide on preventing violence against women in elections. In late 2017, sexual harassment allegations provoked the resignation or dismissal of male parliamentarians and cabinet ministers in Canada, France, and the United Kingdom (Krook 2018).

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Nascent academic research seeks to conceptualize this phenomenon, theorize its origins, map its manifestations, and assess emerging solutions to combat it, with a strong focus on cases in Latin America (Albaine 2015; Cerva Cerna 2014; Freidenberg and Del Valle Pérez 2017; Krook 2017; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016; Piscopo 2016; Restrepo Sanín 2018). To advance the global research agenda on violence against women in politics, this symposium brings together a diverse group of academics and practitioners to address two sets of questions. First, what “is” violence against women in politics? What forms does it take? Why does it occur — and appear to be on the rise? Second, what data is currently available or could be gathered to measure violence against women in politics? What methods might be most appropriate for collecting and analyzing data on this problem?

Juliana Restrepo Sanín surveys and critically analyzes the legal definitions of violence against women in politics that have emerged in Latin America. She argues in favor of a broad concept of “violence,” enabling a more holistic view of its effects on victims and their families, as well as on electoral institutions and democratic values. Delving into the case of Brazil, Flávia Biroli proposes expanding the definition of violence against women in politics to include not only hostility toward politically active women but also backlash against feminist activism in civil society and the state, arguing that the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff and efforts to roll back feminist policy gains as “gender ideology” are intimately intertwined.

Rebecca Kuperberg focuses on online harassment of female politicians in the United Kingdom and Israel. Calling for more intersectional analyses of violence against women in politics, she also demonstrates how using multiple research methods together can generate more accurate insights into the frequency and content of online abuse. Based on pilot study research in the Maldives and Myanmar, Elin Bjarnegård argues that violence against women in elections should be understood as a violation of both personal integrity and electoral integrity. To this end, data collection should move beyond a focus on physical violence to consider both men and women as potential perpetrators and victims. Concluding the symposium, Julie Ballington reviews lessons learned from the development of standardized international indicators on violence against women, suggesting that shared methods will improve the comparability of quantitative and qualitative data on violence against women in politics.

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