

## Ending Violence Against Women in Politics

Special Event hosted by the President of the General Assembly on the sidelines of  
CSW66

Tuesday, 15 March 2022

Trusteeship Council Chamber | 1:15pm – 2:15pm

While women have made significant inroads into politics in recent years, their involvement as candidates, voters, supporters, and activists has spurred attacks, intimidation and harassment in many parts of the world. Violence against women in politics (VAWP) refers to tactics used to silence women's voices in politics. These threats can vary based on the location where the women come from; the type of violence used against them; the perpetrators of such violence; and the time period; with some risks intensifying for women in politics during crucial periods like elections.

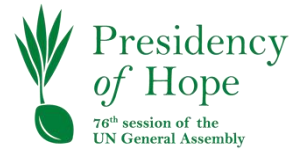
VAWP is essentially gender-based violence that manifests **physically** (e.g. *assassinations, kidnappings, beatings, property damage*), **psychologically** (e.g. *threats, character assassination, denial of salary, stalking and online abuse*) and **sexually** (e.g. *rape, sexual harassment, sexualized threats*), both online and offline. The Internet has created new opportunities for women to express their views and engage politically, but also new ways for perpetrators to subject women to violence. While VAWP manifests in many ways, it is universal in its intent and impact.

VAWP negatively impacts on the work of political institutions (e.g. political parties, parliaments, local councils) and undermines democratic integrity. Women Members of Parliament are among the most visible victims of VAWP.<sup>1</sup> However, VAWP also targets local councillors, election staff, human rights defenders, and less correlated victims, e.g. friends and families of women candidates or public servants. Women voters and candidates have faced targeted, gender-based violence in elections, while women of colour experience even greater levels of violence.

Underreporting of gender-based violence (GBV) is common; victims of VAWP may have additional reasons for not reporting violence, such as fear of being viewed as politically disloyal or weak. Many women normalize violence as part of the political game. They may also believe they will be scorned or blamed for allegedly bringing the abuse upon themselves. Victim-blaming is a common feature in reactions to VAWP, used in the attempt to reinstate patriarchal hierarchies and punish women for entering politics in the first place. Freedom of expression is often used to justify VAWP. At the same time, VAWP may be a violation of the right to freedom of expression of those targeted by violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Annual IPU figures reveal increasing violence against parliamentarians, especially women MPs", 2 December 2020.



Acts of violence against women in politics, constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the obligation to ensure that women can participate in political processes fully and freely, as enshrined in several international human rights laws, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Given that this form of violence aims at inhibiting women from entering and remaining in politics, it is also a threat to democracy and its underlying principles.

Understanding these different risks, and how they diverge from the risks faced by the wider population, is an important step toward identifying effective strategies to protect women from the particular threats that affect their security. Recognizing these unique threats is crucial if half of the world's population is to engage freely and safely in politics. Research on and policy responses to VAWP have been negligible until recently, in large part due to the location of VAWP at the intersection between feminist and political science scholarship. Without data, it is challenging to determine whether the incidence of VAWP is increasing.

When women feel they cannot express their opinion without fear of retaliation or threat, robust political discourse is inhibited, and essential voices are silenced. When women are able to exercise their political leadership, devoid of violence, and in a manner that is authentic to them, the gains are far-reaching<sup>2</sup>. Early research has revealed that misogyny and sexism in politics have short and long term negative effects on women's political engagement, such as dissuading many young women from pursuing politics as a career.

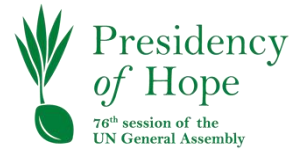
While accounts of violence directed at women in political life, elected or not, are plentiful, proposed solutions are few. At the most basic level, addressing violence against women in politics requires raising greater awareness. Women worldwide have played a crucial role in throwing light on this issue – whether as individuals speaking out about their experiences, as groups drafting collective manifestos or as networks drawing attention to violations of women's political and human rights.

In response, several countries have revised or passed new laws addressing violence against women in politics, while some parliaments and political parties have established new codes of conduct forbidding bullying and harassment. Women's organizations have helped document this problem, while also initiating solidarity campaigns and providing legal and practical support to enhance women's security in political spaces. Political parties can also take action to prevent VAWP and protect and promote political rights. Activism and awareness raising campaigns are necessary and require constant momentum.

Going forward, States have a responsibility to address VAWP as a human rights violation; Parliaments must ensure their institutions enable the participation and work of women MPs; Social Media companies and the courts must not protect online VAWP as “free

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<sup>2</sup> Global Institute of Women's Leadership, “*Women Political Leaders: the impacts of gender on democracy*” (2020)



speech”; Policymakers and Practitioners need to analyze GBV politically and political violence with a gender perspective, translate data for policy needs (including in ‘local’ languages), and connect the absence of VAWP to democratic integrity.

### **Objective:**

Convened on the sidelines of the 66<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women, this event aims to draw the highest-level of Member State attention to Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) and provide the space for Ministers and experts to identify existing structural and normative barriers, as well as new opportunities to eliminate VAWP to ensure women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation in politics.

### **Guiding questions**

- What information is needed for policy makers to fully understand VAWP, its magnitude, causes and consequences, in order for them to take action?
- What are some of the measures that have been taken successfully to combat violence against women in politics?
- What are the key recommendations or shared lessons for ending violence against women in politics?
- What are the challenges of and opportunities for measuring VAWP, drawing on lessons learned from the history of measuring VAW?