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Violence against Women in Politics: A Barrier to Peace and Security

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Although the American policy community views the Women, Peace, and Security Act and the International Violence against Women Act of 2017 as addressing all the myriad problems women face in conflict, these laws do not adequately deal with the particular and pervasive problem of violence against women in politics, nor has the legislation been interpreted as covering it.

Those who commit violence against women in politics (VAWP) seek to control and restrict women's participation in political processes and institutions on the basis of their gender through emotional, social, or economic force; coercion; pressure; or physical and sexual harm.¹ This violence exists worldwide and is a significant barrier to women's political participation.

During the 2017 Kenyan elections, Human Rights Watch found that dozens of women were raped by police officers and men in uniform, and still others experienced sexual violence at the hands of civilians.² Female protesters have been raped or subjected to sexual aggression in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, and other places.³ Zimbabwean women have reported being forced into genital mutilation in response to their political involvement.⁴

In 2015, women in some provinces of Pakistan were barred from voting by traditional councils and "baton-wielding men" at polling stations.⁵ In Afghanistan in 2004, a busload of female poll workers was blown up.⁶ From Kosovo to Canada to Rwanda and the United Kingdom, women report receiving direct threats of physical harm via social media.⁷ Social media is used to attack women around the world, causing fear and

deep shame. In Haiti, Tunisia, Canada, and elsewhere, female parliamentarians and staffers report that other elected MPs and their staff have sexually assaulted them.

Violence against women in politics is integrally connected to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda because it inhibits women from participating in democratic transitions and consolidation, and lack of women's participation undermines electoral integrity, sustainable democracy, and peace. Women's leadership in conflict prevention, management, and resolution and in postconflict relief and recovery efforts does not end with the signing of a peace treaty. Democratization processes are equally vital for achieving WPS objectives.

While international actors, including the United States, increasingly recognize VAWP as a serious impediment to women's political participation, US lawmakers have yet to formally recognize the issue or respond with policy commensurate with the scope of the issue. Preventing and responding to VAWP will require resources, policies, legislation, and training that address the factors that underpin this violence and prioritize it as a threat to human rights, peace, and security.

Barriers to Women's Participation

Systematic, persistent gender-based violence in politics precludes peace. VAWP impedes women's full participation in civic life, undercuts the credibility of political systems, and cements and aggravates existing gender inequities. As such, it threatens the security of the state by contributing to a less democratic, less equal, less peaceful society.

VAWP does not occur in a vacuum; it reflects existing gender inequalities and power dynamics in a society. Where women fear or experience violent retribution for exercising their political agency, there is no equal access to rights and opportunities. Disparity between the treatment of men and women is a marker of a political climate ripe for further conflict. Conversely, inter- and intrastate conflict is likely to fall as gender equality rises.⁸ Furthermore, the likelihood of civil war decreases when a greater proportion of a country's politicians are female, as does use of violence in the face of an international crisis and state-perpetrated human rights abuses. Inclusive political institutions are foundational to peace and security.

In the aftermath of conflict, elections can play a critical role in building such institutions.⁹ Elections often mark the transition from war to peace and a step toward demilitarizing politics and fostering participatory governance.¹⁰ Yet they also can aggravate divides and trigger political violence in fragile postconflict societies.

In fundamentally patriarchal political systems threatened with change, women become targets of violence because of their commitment to vote, their position as electoral officials, or their ambitions for political office. Women running for office, or otherwise exercising their political rights, question established power norms and claim influence men believe to be theirs.

Such violence poses an immense barrier to women's involvement: Over 60 percent of women in India, Nepal, and Pakistan reported that fear of violence precludes them from participating in politics.¹¹ Across 29 countries, women indicated "cultural beliefs/social attitudes/patriarchal mentality" as the chief impediment to their political participation.¹²

In their legislative and policy responses to gender-based violence in conflict, international bodies and national governments have so far focused on women's participation in peace negotiations and political processes during conflict and in the immediate aftermath of conflict. Ignoring the reality of ongoing violence in the political sphere is a dangerous oversight. As the memory and international scrutiny of conflict fades, men often reassert control over democratic institutions, reinstating the policies and practices that

triggered conflict and frequently achieving and maintaining dominance through VAWP.

Long-term peace encompassing postconflict transformation necessitates an inclusive, participatory political space. Such a space cannot exist without women's ability to enter, contribute to, and help shape it.

Violence against women in political and public life (including electoral violence) exists around the world, although it varies significantly in severity and form across and within regions. It may take place in the public sphere or in private, including within the family and the general community, it may occur online or through the media, and it government actors may perpetrate or condone it.¹³

Women are often singled out for political violence and systematic harassment when they seek to vote independent of male influence.¹⁴ Likewise, data show that elected female civic leaders and other women in public life face severe and varied forms of violent repression that may be ignored or viewed as "politics as usual" instead of as gender-specific violence.¹⁵ Such violence impedes the ability of women to exercise their rights as voters, candidates, and citizens.

Victims and Forms of Violence

The victims of gender-based violence in elections and politics include the following:¹⁶

- political actors such as candidates, elected officials, political aspirants (i.e., those seeking nomination), party members, supporters, and staffers;
- electoral management body staff and poll workers, police and security forces, state administrators, and civil servants;
- professionals such as journalists, civic educators, civil and labor activists, and community leaders; and
- private citizens and voters, including minors.

This violence takes many forms, including physical, sexual, social-psychological, and economic. Physical attacks and rape against politically and civically engaged women are recorded on all continents. Yet the vast majority of documented incidents are nonphysical threats such as intimidation and sexual harassment that can sometimes lead to physical assault and death. Repeated online expression targeted at a woman because of her political or public role that causes her substantial emotional distress or fear of bodily harm is also a form of VAWP, and it can include mobilizing social media to terrorize, disseminate defamatory or pornographic images or videos, impersonate, invade privacy, or engage in distributed-denial-of-service attacks.¹⁷

Locations and Prevalence

VAWP occurs in the street, at political party headquarters, and churches, as well as in homes and offices. It occurs in between intimate partners and family members as well as in public virtual spaces such as television, blogs, internet media, chatrooms, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.¹⁸ It may appear in private virtual spaces such as personal email, messaging, texting, WhatsApp, Viber, and in cellular and landline connections. Violence occurring online includes aggressive, abusive and harassing psychological violence as well as incitation to commit physical or sexual violence. A 2016 survey of 55 women parliamentarians from 39 countries found that 81.8 percent of respondents had been subjected to one or more acts of psychological violence, 21.8 percent had been subjected to one or more acts of sexual violence, 25.5 percent had experienced one or more acts of physical violence, and 32.7 percent had experienced one or more acts of economic violence (e.g., being denied funds that an individual is entitled to during their term of office or political campaign; being denied other resources an individual is entitled to in connection with their political office or campaign (offices, computers, staff, salary); harm or threats to harm a business, termination, or threat of termination of employment; or other threats or theft related to one's livelihood).¹⁹

Perpetrators and Motivations

Perpetrators of this violence include both men and women from various groups:²⁰

- institutional actors (state security, police, armed forces), government institutions (executive, judicial and legislative actors), electoral agents (poll workers, electoral management staff, electoral security agents), and state proxies (militia, gangs, insurgents, mercenaries, private security) who may employ gendered forms of violence (rape, virginity tests, sexual assault) in cases where they engage in repressive tactics in the course of an electoral process or in a political scope;
- nonstate political actors (candidates, party leaders, inter-party and intraparty members, paramilitary, party militia, nonstate armed actors) who frequently target politically active women in order to gain electoral advantage, reduce competition, or simply punish women for venturing into a male-dominated space; and
- societal actors (journalists/media, voters, community members or groups, religious leaders, traditional leaders, employers, criminal actors, intimate partners or spouses, family members, electoral observers, youth groups) who commit both physical attacks and severe psychological censure, humiliation, and affronts against all classes of women who seek to exert independent, free will in the exercise of their civic and political rights.

International Efforts to Protect Women in Politics

Many international donors, nongovernmental organizations, and international organizations have worked specifically on VAWP in recent years: UN Women, UNDP, International IDEA, ParlAmericas, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the Organization of American States, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Commonwealth.

At the international level, the rights of women to participate in political and public office, as well as live a life free from violence, are established in comprehensive normative frameworks established by UN Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council resolutions. The adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in 2015 (A/RES/70/1) provides further impetus for states to address and combat gender discrimination and violence against women and to ensure women can fully realize their political rights. In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, will prepare and submit a thematic report to the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2018 on VAWP.

Women's activism has spurred global awareness of the problem. Civil society women's groups have proposed and helped implement four key actions: targeted legislation, policy responses such as training for electoral security providers, service provision, and awareness raising.

1. Legislation. Some countries have passed or drafted legislation to address violence against women in political and public life, including Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru. With the backing of the Union of Parliamentary Women of Bolivia (UMPABOL) and women's nongovernmental advocacy groups, Bolivia's Legislative Assembly approved the groundbreaking Law against Harassment and Political Violence against Women on 14 May 2012 to protect women and their political participation. The law seeks to "defend and guarantee the enjoyment of political rights by female candidates—incumbent and elected—and to guarantee a legal framework and set penalties for individual and collective harassment and political violence."²¹ The Bolivian law establishes penalties for perpetrators of acts of political harassment and violence against women candidates and elected and acting officials, including administrative, civil, and criminal measures, and may temporarily or permanently bar offenders from public office.

2. Policy Responses. Civic activism and awareness has, for example, contributed to specific training for electoral security providers on VAWP in Sri Lanka and the creation of women's situation rooms in multiple African countries.

These situation rooms bring together women, youths, media, political and governmental stakeholders, professionals, and religious and traditional personalities to ensure transparent, peaceful electoral processes through peace advocacy, intervention, coordination, political analysis, observation, and documentation.

3. Service Provision. Shelters and emergency hospital support have been offered in some extreme cases, as in Kenya.²² However, the needs of female targets of political violence typically differ from those that are common to survivors of domestic violence. Programs to support access to justice, including overcoming the challenges of documenting evidence and bringing perpetrators to justice, are under way in Zimbabwe.²³ Other forms of service include direct assistance and bystander intervention for cases of VAWP (including online threats).

4. Awareness Raising. Women have made long strides toward awareness of the issue worldwide, including through national and global campaigns driven by domestic civil society groups on every continent and international nonprofits and organizations. The issue has been raised through decentralized, organic movements as well, most notably the #MeToo movement, which stimulated discussion in national and subnational legislatures in the US, France, and Canada. Some awareness-raising activities focus on men and boys.²⁴

US Engagement

The United States has highlighted VAWP in policy spaces and dialogues and has supported programs to provide services and technical support, but it has failed to implement policy or legislative responses that recognize, mitigate, and prevent this violence.

Members of Congress have addressed the issue explicitly in a bipartisan briefing by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in 2017 and in remarks at international fora.²⁵ The State Department's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations' Election Violence Assessment Framework situates gendered analysis of electoral violence into their actor analysis of potential perpetrators and victims. The State Department's Future Leaders Exchange Program hosted a dialogue with the Woodrow Wilson Center's Global Women's Leadership Initiative on the topic.²⁶

The Carter Center's USAID-funded international observation mission to Kenya in 2017 collected relevant data. USAID has also funded research by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) to produce "Violence against Women in Elections: A Framework for Assessment, Monitoring, and Response" and research on the effects of electoral violence on women, including a case study of

Bangladesh.²⁷ USAID's Best Practices in Electoral Security recognizes the special vulnerabilities to violence faced by women in elections, acknowledges women's protection and equality legislation as a best practice for preventing electoral conflict, and encourages gendered monitoring of elections.²⁸ The National Democratic Institute has received funding from the National Endowment for Democracy to work on VAWP.

Since 2011, USAID has funded research and activities to prevent and mitigate violence against women in politics and specifically in elections through country-level democracy and governance programs. Such projects included work in Haiti, Kenya, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe as well as global research.²⁹ In 2017, USAID allocated a global technical leadership award to explore violence against women in elections online in social media.

Despite this US government engagement, violence against women in political and public life has not been formally recognized or defined in US policy. To ensure US foreign policy is best equipped to promote peace and security, the government must implement VAWP-specific policy and interpret existing legislation to cover women's engagement in politics.

Links to Existing US Legislation

The United States has long championed the notion that peace requires the full engagement, participation, and equality of women. In 2017, Congress affirmed US leadership on this issue by passing the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017, a piece of bipartisan legislation requiring the US government to increase and strengthen women's participation in peace negotiations and conflict prevention. The act builds on the principles of the US National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (US NAP), put forth in 2011 and revised in 2016.

Prevention of and response to VAWP is integral to continued US leadership on women, peace, and security, to the resolutions made under the NAP, and to the current administration's legal obligations under the 2017 legislation.

The NAP enshrines the US government's firm commitment to undertake the following actions:

- promote and strengthen women's rights, leadership, and meaningful participation in all aspects of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, including transitional processes and decision-making institutions;
- protect women from all forms of violence, in recognition that gender-based violence not only violates the rights of its victims, but also jeopardizes the security and prosperity of nations by subverting women's participation in civic and political life; and

- promote women's roles in preventing conflict, mass atrocities, and violent extremism.

The WPS Act reaffirms, deepens, and legally requires action on the principles expressed in the NAP. It states that “the political participation and leadership of women in fragile environments, particularly during democratic transitions, is critical to sustaining lasting democratic institutions.” Furthermore, the act sets out concrete policy objectives for the realization of the WPS agenda, obligating the US government to do the following:

- encourage partner governments to adopt strategies for ensuring the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and decision-making institutions;
- promote the physical safety, economic security, and dignity of women and girls;
- adapt policies and programs to achieve better outcomes in gender equality and women's empowerment; and
- undertake gendered data collection and analysis to improve early warning systems of conflict and violence.

Recommendations

The WPS Act calls for a national strategy on WPS and legally obligates the current administration to satisfy the policy objectives outlined within it. The United States should establish itself as a global leader in promoting the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of democratic participation, including by seeking the elimination of VAWP. In view of WPS Act obligations and to ensure that VAWP is fully addressed, we recommend five key actions:

1. Prioritize the prevention of and response to VAWP in US foreign policy by integrating it into key policies:
 - recognize and develop a strategy to mitigate the distinct impact of postconflict/peacetime political violence on women and the harmful consequences of such violence for democracy and development in key documents informing US foreign policy, including the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy;
 - outline specific provisions on prevention and response to VAWP in the national strategy on WPS required by the WPS Act of 2017;
 - integrate VAWP into any existing, relevant strategic plans of the Department of State or USAID;
 - institute a policy to support monitoring all aspects of women's participation in public and political life, including rates of VAWP;
 - encourage all US-funded programs in the areas of democracy and governance, peace and security, and women's empowerment to establish guidelines for addressing VAWP, identify country-specific risks, and adopt effective measures to prevent and mitigate it; and
2. Introduce targeted legislation that would do the following:
 - ensure that appropriate personnel of the Department of State and USAID receive training and awareness of VAWP that encompasses the nature and impact of VAWP and policy responses to it.
 - guarantee the ability of women to participate on equal terms in public functions and at all levels of government and public decision-making processes in order to ensure the full realization of women's political rights;
 - recognize and define VAWP as a violation of human rights, and establish as a policy of the United States the promotion of women's meaningful participation in all aspects of democratic life by taking effective action to prevent and mitigate VAWP, including through diplomatic efforts and programs;
 - ensure that Department of State and USAID adopt coordinated global and mission-level plans of action to prevent and mitigate VAWP, and establish guidelines and reporting requirements for relevant contractors and aid recipients;
 - implement a government action plan through technical assistance, training, or data support for relevant actors;
 - report to Congress on progress against program-specific objectives of the national strategy in electoral management, political party support, good governance, associative life, and the media.
3. Dedicate adequate resources to preventing VAWP and protecting women against it:
 - Fully fund actions to prevent and mitigate VAWP across US government activity areas and under targeted legislation, as described above;
 - allocate additional funding to monitor and collect data on women's participation in public and political life, including data on VAWP;
 - adopt the UN target of committing 15 percent of peacekeeping and security assistance to promoting women's participation and protection. Protect existing funds for gender-focused foreign assistance and seek opportunities to fund programs that address the causes underpinning VAWP, including legal provisions that limit women's political participation and access to justice, societal norms that create hostility toward women's voices, structural barriers that make it more difficult for women to exercise their political rights, and the lack of women's inclusion in designing and negotiating postconflict transformation processes, including elections.
4. Systematically integrate and coordinate VAWP prevention and mitigation efforts into foreign assistance programs, including diplomatic efforts and development programs that do the following:

- recognize the distinct impact of postconflict/peacetime political violence on women and the harmful consequences of such violence for democracy and development;
 - address the causes underpinning VAWP through multisectoral, country-specific, culturally adapted approaches, including legal provisions that limit women's political participation and access to justice, societal norms that create hostility to women, structural barriers that hinder women from exercising their political rights, and the lack of women's inclusion in designing and negotiating postconflict transformation processes, including elections;
 - promote the safety of women in political and public life and end impunity for criminal forms of VAWP, including systematic harassment, discrimination, and online abuse;
 - encourage governments to enhance gender equality through measures to prevent and mitigate VAWP, including national legislation with clear designations of responsibility for implementation and compliance;
 - consult and collaborate with a wide variety of local nongovernmental partners with experience in promoting inclusive democracy and in preventing or mitigating violence against women, including women-led organizations and faith-based organizations;
 - engage with men and boys as partners in the effort to reduce VAWP on a sustainable basis; and
 - exert sustained international leadership to prevent or mitigate VAWP, including in bilateral and multilateral fora.
5. Ensure gendered monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of US foreign policy and legislation:
- outline and define gender-disaggregated M&E indicators on prevention and response to VAWP in the national strategy on WPS, in targeted legislation, and in foreign assistance programs;
 - collect and analyze gender-disaggregated data on the prevalence and impacts of VAWP for the purpose of developing and enhancing responses to prevent or mitigate it;
 - provide and advocate for adequate resources for monitoring all aspects of women's electoral and political participation, including VAWP, in US-funded international and domestic election observation missions;
 - monitor, analyze, and evaluate social institutions that will actualize these programs—governments, social sectors, education, labor—for gender bias;

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The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a nonpartisan network of 39 civil society organizations with expertise on issues involving women, war, and peace. Established in 2010, the working group acts in its capacity as an engaged, voluntary coalition to support the U.S. government’s efforts to implement national strategies, plans, and policies related to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS).

