

A Global Movement to End Violence against Women in Politics and Public Life

Written by Mona Lena Krook

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/04/25/a-global-movement-to-end-violence-against-women-in-politics-and-public-life/>

MONA LENA KROOK, APR 25 2021

Every March, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) brings together international organizations, governments, politicians, and activists from around the world. Over the course of two weeks, participants discuss advances and setbacks in gender equality – and place new priorities on the global agenda. In 2021, the CSW theme united two strands of work that, until recently, were treated separately: women’s political participation and the elimination of violence against women.

In his preparatory report, the UN Secretary-General expressed concerns about ‘increasing levels of violence perpetrated against women in public life,’ which seek ‘to stop women from accessing power and silence them so as to limit their perspectives in policy formulation.’ In addition to being taken up in plenary sessions, the topic of violence against women in politics and public life was also the focus of numerous side events. These vibrant sessions featured women’s testimonies, distributed new data, and presented emerging solutions to this problem around the world.

Entering the Global Stage

Three parallel campaigns are responsible for bringing global attention to violence against women in politics and public life. In the late 1990s, activists around the world began to speak out on violence against women human rights defenders. Following global recognition that ‘women’s rights are human rights,’ a growing international network criticized prevailing understandings of violence against human rights defenders centering men and their experience of human rights abuses. This coalition highlighted that violations did not only occur in public spaces at the hand of the state, leading to imprisonment and torture; they also took place in private spaces, involved non-state actors, and could entail violations that were gendered or sexual in nature.

In the late 2000s, growing numbers of women elected to political office – due largely to the widespread introduction of gender quotas – sparked global conversations on violence against women in politics and elections. Inspired by women’s experiences on the ground, these debates pointed to the limitations of traditional understandings of political violence as acts motivated by policy differences against political opponents. These actors argued in favor of recognizing a second type of political violence, one that specifically targeted women in efforts to exclude them as *women* from participating in political life.

The third strand, gaining momentum in the early 2010s, concerns violence against women journalists. Building on international recognition of physical violence against journalists as a threat to freedom of expression, these discussions highlighted the specific and often overlooked threats faced by women in the profession. These included sexual violence in the field and in the newsroom, as well as escalating online attacks that were intended not to address the content of a woman’s reporting, but rather, to degrade her as a woman.

In my recent book, *Violence against Women in Politics*, I argue for joining these strands to unite efforts to address violence as a barrier to the full realization of women’s political and human rights. This multi-sector view is reflected in recent moves by UN actors to embed violence against women in public life into various international frameworks. In

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2017, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW) Committee issued General Recommendation No. 35 stating that 'harmful practices and crimes against women human rights defenders, politicians, activists, or journalists are... forms of gender-based violence against women.' In 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 73/148, which expressed concerns about 'all acts of violence, including sexual harassment, against women and girls involved in political and public life, including women in leadership positions, journalists and other media workers, and human rights defenders.'

Documenting the Problem

Over the last five years, an expanding collection of studies have shed light on women's experiences with violence in the political realm. A 2019 analysis by ACLED found that peaceful protests featuring women disproportionately met with excessive force (live fire) or intervention (arrests and tear gas) than protests involving men or mixed-sex groups.

In 2016, a path-breaking report on violence against women in parliaments published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union revealed that 80% of interviewees had experienced psychological abuse in connection with their political work. And in 2018, a survey of 600 women journalists by the International Women's Media Foundation revealed that nearly two-thirds had been threatened or harassed online at least once, including 10% who had received death threats.

The sheer number of events organized in relation to these topics at this year's CSW meetings indicates growing global awareness of violence against women in politics and public life. As one panelist noted in a session I attended last month, 'There is no longer any doubt that this problem exists.'

Events of 2020 and 2021, indeed, have thrown this issue into even sharper relief. COVID-19 lockdowns have increased the safety-related vulnerabilities of women human rights defenders, making it easier for armed actors, for example, to find and harm women activists. The pandemic has also served as a pretext for restricting women's ability to protest, especially against state-led attacks on women's rights.

At the same time, rising authoritarian tendencies in contemporary politics, combined with rapidly evolving digital technologies, have provided a fertile environment for 'gendered disinformation' targeting women politicians and journalists. These attacks draw on gendered, and often sexualized, tropes to spread false or misleading rumors aimed at humiliating and discrediting women in public life.

Gendered disinformation campaigns are often intersectional, disproportionately targeting politicians who are women of color, like U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris and Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar. For journalists like Maria Ressa, such campaigns also seek to undermine public trust in their reporting by framing it, inaccurately, as 'fake news.'

Mobilizing for Change

The global community is at a vital crossroads in the recognition of violence against women in politics and public life. Growing awareness must now be matched by concrete actions to tackle this problem. In his CSW report, the UN Secretary-General offered a series of recommendations: legal reforms, reporting mechanisms, training and services, standards on online abuse, and data collection.

Calls for action on this issue are not new. In 2016, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched the #NotTheCost campaign to stop violence against women in politics. Its Global Call to Action outlined steps that actors at a variety of levels – international, national, and local – could take to mitigate this problem. Last month, on the fifth anniversary of the campaign, NDI issued a Renewed Call to Action with a list of emerging best practices around the world. Expanding global attention provides an unprecedented opportunity to build on this momentum. The first task is to reject arguments that violence is simply a 'normal' part of the political process, and instead, recognize the serious threats posed by this problem to democracy, human rights, and gender equality. Only then will it be possible to support women's full, equal, and safe participation in political life around the globe.

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