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STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY BY REDUCING THREATS TO WOMEN IN POLITICS

LOCAL EVIDENCE. SHARED SOLUTIONS

COMPENDIUM REPORT

Editors: Hannah Phillips and Rosario Grimà Algora

Contributors: Amna Baig, Prakriti Bhattarai, Isatou M. Bokum, Jaclyn Corin and Ema Grajcarová

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Please contact Professor Ngaire Woods or Hannah Phillips for more information about this University of Oxford project.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence, abuse and harassment toward politically active women is a growing global problem. This specific phenomenon – from regular online abuse to rape threats to murder – impacts women because of their gender and political participation. A growing research agenda has advanced understandings of the manifestation of this problem for women in politics. Yet, less is known about the perpetrators and the solutions.

The 'Strengthening Democracy by Reducing Threats to Women in Politics' project at the Blavatnik School of Government and the University of Oxford seeks to develop evidence-based support to reduce the violent threats aimed at politically active women in order to improve democracies. The report reflects the work of Master of Public Policy (MPP) students who completed their capstone, summer projects under the supervision of Professor Ngaire Woods and Research Associates, Hannah Phillips and Rosaria Grimà Algora.

The projects cover a range of topics on violence against women in politics: (1) the European Union's policy responses to violence against women in politics, (2) the identities, behaviours and motivations of perpetrators in Sub-Saharan Africa, (3) a comparison between Violence against Women Act and a failed attempt to adopt a parliamentary resolution acknowledging violence against women in politics in the USA, (4) the efficiency of the Pakistani legal framework on prosecuting tech-facilitated violence against women in politics, and (5) mapping the main measures adopted by social media companies on content moderation.

This research stresses the complexity of solutions to address violence against women in politics. Common challenges include: political unwillingness to acknowledge violence against women in politics as a specific phenomenon, the inadequacy of implementation of existing legal and policy frameworks, and the global and national difficulty of regulating social media companies and prosecuting online crimes.

Policy solutions to violence against women in politics need to be holistic including leveraging existing mechanisms, adopting new measures, and engaging with all relevant actors. Multiple actors – including national governments, political parties, civil society and the international community – have a real opportunity to support women and improve our political institutions from policy advocacy, policy making and policy implementation.

While each report offers specific suggestions for the relevant context, we synthesise 20 common recommendations that could be applied in different areas:

| Responsible Body/ies | Recommendation | Policy Cycle |
|---|--|-----------------|
| Politicians and Civil Society | Build a broad coalition of support across ideologies and sectors: present violence against women in politics not just as a gender-specific problem but as a broader issue of public safety, violence deterrence, and democracy. | Policy advocacy |
| Men, especially male politicians | Champion the issue of violence against women in politics as matter that should be prioritised for the sake of democracy. | Policy advocacy |
| Civil Society | Integrate violence against women in politics into advocacy agenda e.g. feminist movement, digital regulation and political participation | Policy advocacy |
| (Traditional) Media | Prioritise raising awareness of the problem of violence against women in politics and the solutions. Frame the issue as important for protecting democracy. | Policy advocacy |
| International Community | Collaborate and cooperate in the regulation of social media companies. | Policy advocacy |
| National Government | Prioritise the gender equality portfolio in the senior levels of government. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Create specific offences for violence against women, including technology-facilitated violence. Legislative efforts could be within protections for all politicians and/or integrated within public safety or violence legislation and/or in hate crime legislation and/or in online regulation. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Strengthen online regulation: encourage the adoption of proactive technologies and safety as key performance indicator. Penalise non-compliance. Create a well-resourced, powerful regulator for social media companies, ensuring a focus on gender and public life. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Engage with and leverage the expertise of civil society and others who work to address violence against women in politics to create policy and support mechanisms. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Establish and implement policies that ensure equitable access to political finance, such as public funding allocations for women candidates and measures against economic violence. | Policy making |
| National Government, International Community, Civil Society, Research Community | Establish, implement and evaluate measures to challenge and change harmful gender norms e.g. community sensitisation programs for religious and opinion leaders, educational institutions, and the general public. | Policy making |

| Responsible Body/ies | Recommendation | Policy Cycle |
|--|---|---------------------------------|
| National Governments, International Community, Civil Society, Research Community | Close the research gaps on violence against women in politics, especially in terms of understanding perpetrators, specific manifestations and the impacts on politically active women and their communities. Report on the prevalence and impact of violence against women in politics, and the effectiveness of policy measures. | Policy making |
| Social Media Companies | Engage with national governments, politicians and third sector/civil society to develop context-specific guidelines for content moderation. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Improve coordination between bodies responsible for different aspects of violence against women in politics (e.g. online regular, prosecutors, different police departments) | Policy implementation |
| National Governments | Leverage existing laws and resources to address violence against women in politics e.g. ensuring proper resourcing for implementation and training on how existing legislation should be applied to political contexts. | Policy implementation |
| National Governments | Properly resource law enforcement abilities to address violence against women in politics with a dedicated budget and with experts e.g. trained female police officers and clear support services. | Policy implementation |
| National Governments (Parliaments) | Establish independent bodies to investigate allegations of violence against women in politics. | Policy making & implementation |
| Political Parties | Establish and enforce clear protocols that explicitly prohibit violence against women in politics. Establish policies that ensure equitable access to political finance to women. | Policy making & implementation |
| Social Media Companies | Publish regular transparency reports detailing the types of content reported, actions taken, and response times. | Policy making & implementation |
| National Governments, International Community, Civil Society, Research Community | Collect gender-disaggregated data for policy monitoring and evaluation for online regulation (and other relevant policies) | Policy making, & and evaluation |

INTRODUCTION

Hannah Phillips and Rosario Grimà Algora

The Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford envisages “a world better led, a world better served and a world better governed.” A core part of the School’s work is teaching current and future political leaders. Over the last few years, a number of women alumni have contacted Professor Dean Ngaire Woods, Dean of the School, and other colleagues to share their experiences of gendered abuse during their political campaigns or public service.

The experiences of the School’s alumni reflect a growing, global pattern of violence, abuse and harassment toward politically active women. This specific phenomenon impacts women because of their gender and political participation. For example, a 2016 study found that 81.8% of women parliamentarians around the world who responded to a survey faced psychological violence, which could include online sexualised images and rape threats.ⁱ The UK Electoral Commission reported on the gendered differences on the impacts of abuse and intimidation in the 2014 local elections campaign: over half (56%) of women candidates avoided campaigning alone and 47% of women avoided discussing controversial topics, compared with 19% and 20% of men, respectively.ⁱⁱ

This report is part of a larger project that seeks to fill the knowledge gap of how to address violence towards women in politics. A growing body of research has advanced understandings of the manifestation of this problem for women in politics.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, less is known about the perpetrators and presence and effectiveness of solutions. The vision of the ‘[Strengthening Democracy by Reducing Threats to Women in Politics](#)’ project is to develop evidence-based support to reduce the violent threats aimed at politically active women, including the School’s alumni, with a view to improving democracies.

Based at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, the project began in the summer of 2023, in partnership with German-based HateAid, Technical University Munich and the Alfred Landecker Foundation. This initial phase culminated in January 2024 with a report and expert roundtable event to review global measures to address violence against women in politics, particularly focusing on online violence.^{iv} This report proposed a series of recommendations on the measuring and monitoring of online violence against women in politics, on support mechanisms available for victims of such violence, and on governmental policy.

The second, current, phase of the project conducts original, interdisciplinary research and outreach into the policy challenges and opportunities around the world. The present report reflects the work of five Master of Public Policy (MPP) students who completed their capstone summer projects policy reports under the supervision of Professor Ngaire Woods and Research Associates, Hannah Phillips and Rosario Grimà Algora. The MPP students chose their research questions and approaches under the remit of the overall project’s aims. The global and multi- and inter-disciplinary nature of the problem and solutions are reflected in their work.

In the first report, Ema Grajcarová examines the European Union's response to violence against women in politics. Grajcarová focuses on the main EU policies that address – or could potentially address – this form of violence, and analyses them based on four indicators: (i) gender mainstreaming, (ii) intersectional lenses, (iii) contextual framework for violence against women in politics, and (iv) policy solutions for gender-based violence and/or violence against women in politics. Grajcarová concludes that the EU's response to violence against women in politics is insufficient, and that it must adopt a more comprehensive approach that includes specific protections for women in politics, enhanced data collection, and international collaboration.

Isatou M. Bokum then provides a comprehensive analysis of the identity, actions, behaviours and motivations of perpetrators of violence against women in politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. Bokum considers that understanding who the perpetrators are is essential to develop effective laws and policies to address violence against women in politics. Bokum finds that the main perpetrators in Sub-Saharan Africa are men, mainly male politicians. This mirrors research conducted in other regions. Bokum classifies the motivations behind the violence under: (i) psychosocial factors of perpetrators, including the embeddedness of patriarchal culture and norms, and (ii) political dynamics – which is heightened by competitive, and sometimes violence, political environments. Bokum urges further research on the perpetrators in order to tailor policy intervention against violence against women in politics, as well as several other measures to strengthen institutional accountability and address underlying cultural norms.

We then move to the USA. Jaclyn Corin examines the resistance to national efforts to define and address violence against women in politics in law in the USA. She conducts a comparative analysis of the legislative processes between the successful 'Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)' and the failed House Resolution. 220 'Recognizing Violence against Women in Politics as a Global Phenomenon and Supporting Women's Full and Meaningful Participation in Political Life.' Corin argues that increasing partisan polarization has significantly eroded the bipartisan cooperation for issues of violence against women. She urges for strategic cooperation and prioritization among politicians and feminist advocacy, and framing the problem as important for public safety and democracy.

Amna Baig explores the Pakistani regulation on tech-facilitated violence against women in politics. In particular, she examines the extent to which the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, (PECA), the main bill addressing electronic crimes, adequately addresses such violence. Baig interviews experts on the field, including law enforcement officials, and follows the complaints presented by female politicians under PECA. Baig concludes that to reduce the impunity of this type of crimes, the wording of PECA should be amended as to explicitly include tech-facilitated violence against women, there should be an increased in resources and capacity building of law

enforcement officials, and stronger collaboration with - and from - social media platforms.

The final report takes a global approach. Prakriti Bhattarai examines the changing policies of the multi-national social media companies, focussing on two major platforms, META (Facebook, Instagram) and X (former Twitter). She argues that measures are inadequate to address online violence against women in politics largely because of technological limitations and the ad-driven revenue model of social media. Bhattarai urges national governments to better regulate social media companies with a range measures including proactive technologies, user safety, support mechanisms and transparency.

These original research reports offer insights into the challenges and opportunities for policy and adjacent actors to prevent and address violence towards women in politics. Each report ends with specific recommendations. In our conclusion, we synthesise 20 common recommendations that could be adapted by national governments, political parties, civil society and the international community to support women, change our institutions and strengthen democracy for all.

THE EU'S RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS: IS IT ENOUGH?

Ema Grajcarová

Abstract

This report critically examines the European Union's (EU) response to violence against women in politics (VAWIP), a pervasive issue that undermines gender equality and democratic representation. Despite the EU's commitment to gender equality and democratic representation,^v female politicians continue to face disproportionate violence aimed at deterring their political participation. This report evaluates the effectiveness of the EU's legislative and policy measures in addressing VAWIP, by examining the extent to which they engage in gender mainstreaming, intersectionality, recognise VAWIP as a distinct phenomenon, and provide of specific policy solutions.

The analysis reveals that while the EU initiated or implemented several important policies and recommendations, significant gaps persist. The Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence^{vi} ("Directive") sets important standards but fails to specifically address VAWIP. Efforts to extend crimes to include hate speech and gender-based violence (GBV) have stalled within the EU legislative process. The Digital Services Act^{vii} (DSA) mandates risk assessments for GBV on online platforms, yet effective implementation requires a robust coordination among legislators, platforms, and civil society.

Policy recommendations focus on enhancing protections for female politicians within existing EU frameworks and exploring new possibilities where strengthened cooperation with the non-legislative bodies of the EU and international cooperation are emphasised. Further analysis of the impact of artificial intelligence on VAWIP is also recommended. A harmonised approach, detailed protective measures, and comprehensive data collection are crucial for effectively combating VAWIP and ensuring women's equal participation in the public sphere.

Introduction

“It is difficult for a woman to get into politics (...) and when she gets there, she faces a really disproportionate, unfair attack on everything that is linked to being a woman. It is not an environment that is attractive for women.”

- Mária Kolíková, vice-president of Freedom and Solidarity party, former Minister of Justice of the Slovak Republic^{viii}

“This violence is the sign of an ever-increasing reaction to our female presence, visibility and unity ... [it can come from] members of the public who oppose our political views or our very presence in the political world.”

- Lavinia Bianchi, Councilor from the Italian city of Civitanova Marche^x

“[I have been] a target of psychological and physical violence (...), as well as online harassment which seriously affected my health and ultimately led me to leave politics.

- Anne Herzezeel, a former councilor in the Belgian municipality of Éghezée^x

These are just few testimonies of European female politicians, from Slovakia, through Italy, to Belgium. Violence is present in politics in many shapes and forms, and unfortunately it is common for many public figures. However, research on VAWIP shows that the objective of the violence differs when it targets female politicians: perpetrators are targeting women because of their gender, aiming to prevent them from public representation.^{xi xii} Therefore, this report aims to contribute to the research on VAWIP by mapping and analysing the EU's response to this phenomenon.

In part 1, I explore academic research defining VAWIP as a distinct type of violence together with some key related concepts, which mirror my criteria for the subsequent analysis. In part 2, I present the methodology and criteria through which I conduct my report analysis, which are: focus on gender mainstreaming, intersectionality, VAWIP as a distinct phenomenon, and policy responses tailored to VAWIP. In part 3, I analyse the relevant EU policies (hard and soft law) and discuss their reflection on the pre-set criteria. In the last part, I outline some of the policy recommendation and conclude that more work needs to be done within the EU legislation and beyond to address VAWIP sufficiently.

Literature review and Theoretical Approach

Gender and gender mainstreaming

Achieving gender equality is essential not only because it is a fundamental human right but also because it has significant socio-economic benefits. When women are empowered, it leads to robust economies characterised by enhanced productivity and growth. Despite this, deep-seated gender inequalities persist globally. Across the globe, women face discrimination and violence and are often underrepresented in political and economic decision-making roles.^{xiii} Focusing on women and their rights to participate in the political sphere freely not only addresses gender inequalities and human rights, but also strengthens democracy through equal representation.

In this report, I use the category of women broadly, following the definition provided by European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)^{xiv} defining women as people who are assigned a female sex at birth, or those who define themselves as women. I do, however, acknowledge that people fall beyond the binary of “men” and “women,” and these persons experience forms of violence in politics that ought to be explored much further.

Gender mainstreaming comes from the premise that women face different needs and circumstances, including disparities in access to resources, rights, and institutions.^{xv} Gender mainstreaming aims to integrate these differences in all policies both by addressing an unequal representation and by integrating gender perspectives in the policies actions.^{xvi} For VAWIP research, it is crucial to apply gender perspective lenses so as to understand an unequal position of women in GBV and VAWIP in particular.

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality emphasises that personal identities such as sex, race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability, among others, intersect with each other to create unique forms of violence and discrimination. According to this approach, the different types of discrimination do not simply “add up” - they form a function with a multiplying effect.^{xvii}

In the context of VAWIP, an intersectional approach is essential for recognising that women do not experience political spaces uniformly. Instead, their experiences are mediated by their multiple identities, which can exacerbate their experience of violence and affect their access to justice and political participation. Analysis of Amnesty International UK shows that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women MPs are affected by an online abuse far more than their white colleagues, regardless of their political affiliation.^{xviii}

VAWIP

VAWIP as a distinct phenomenon has been a subject of the ongoing academic debate without having a universally accepted definition.^{xix xx} In this report, I am adopting an understanding that focuses on a motive of the violence towards female politicians: to prevent women (in all their diversity) from participating in politics. In this sense, it differs from violence against politicians, which usually aims at the policy they represent.^{xxi xxii} In the EU, data from Italy proves that regardless of the policies representing, female mayors were three times more likely to face violence than their male colleagues. The research showed that perpetrators use violence as a form of backlash to women's political representation, aiming to reduce the number of women in positions of power.^{xxiii}

Krook, who has academically introduced the concept of VAWIP,^{xxiv xxv} specifies that VAWIP is not the only type of violence women in politics face,^{xxvi} but its specificity lies in discriminating on and prevent from representation of women *because they are women*. Thus, it not only causes threats to electoral and personal integrity, but also to democracy, human rights, and gender equality.^{xxvii}

Additional research on VAWIP and its consequences is needed to better understand what impact it poses on female politicians and how to combat it with public policies and legislations. This report aims to contribute to the scholarship by examining if the EU's policies are reflecting on the specificities VAWIP poses for the female politicians in the EU.

Methodology

Data

This report analyses EU policies relevant for the GBV and VAWIP. From my review of the EU legislation and available reports on the topic, I selected documents (outlined in Table 1) that are most relevant to allow an in-depth evaluation of the EU's approach to addressing VAWIP within the space constraints.

The EU employs various legislative instruments, including directives and regulations, which are legally binding. Directives set goals that Member States must achieve, allowing flexibility in implementation, while regulations are directly applicable and enforceable in all Member States. Additionally, the EU utilises non-binding instruments, such as recommendations and opinions, known as soft law.^{xxviii}

This report will examine both binding and non-binding EU acts relevant to the topic of VAWIP. It is important to note that the EU's ability to legislate in this area is contingent upon the legal authority granted by its treaties, requiring a clear legal basis for any legislative action.^{xxix}

Table 1. Data included in the analysis

| Title of the document | Relevance for the report |
|--|--|
| <p>Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence</p> | <p>The directive represents the first stand-alone legislation dedicated to combating violence against women. Legally enforceable standards across all Member States should strengthen protection and support and indirectly supports measures against VAWIP by promoting safer engagement in political processes.</p> |
| <p>Commission's communication: A more inclusive and protective Europe: extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime</p> | <p>The communication proposes an expansion of the EU's list of recognised crimes to include hate speech and hate crime, which could significantly impact the safety of the political environment for women.</p> |
| <p>European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on identifying gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU</p> | <p>This resolution could send a significant political message against violence directed at women, including those in political spheres. If the measures included are translated into the legislation, they could ensure that GBV is prosecutable across all Member States, thus enhancing protections against VAWIP.</p> |
| <p>EP resolution on measures to prevent and combat mobbing and sexual harassment in the workplace, public spaces, and political life in the EU (2018)</p> | <p>This resolution aims at addressing harassment in various spheres, including political environments. The document specifically calls for the protection for women in political life by advocating for policies and legal frameworks that prevent harassment, contributing to the fight against VAWIP.</p> |
| <p>Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of Council of 19 October 2022 on a</p> | <p>This regulation indirectly supports efforts to combat VAWIP by mandating stricter control over online content potentially reducing the</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) | incidence of online violence and harassment targeted at women in politics. |
|---|--|

Methods

In my qualitative document analysis, I identify the extent to which the policies apply:

- 1. gender mainstreaming;
- 2. intersectional lenses;
- 3. contextual framework to understand VAWIP as a distinct phenomenon; and
- 4. policy solutions for GBV, and specifically VAWIP.

I am analysing the policies through these criteria by searching for key words and implications in the adopted texts. Firstly, for gender mainstreaming, I look for articles incorporating gender perspectives, gender mainstreaming, female (public positions), to determine if policies are designed with an understanding of the specific challenges women face.

Secondly, I apply intersectional lenses by searching for inclusive language, explicitly addressing intersectional violence. It is important to note that intersectional implications might be fully revealed at the implementation phase of the policies.

Thirdly, examining if there is a contextual framework helps to understand VAWIP as a distinct phenomenon, crucial for tailored interventions. I am searching for key words as "female politicians", "female public figures", or articles that talk about aggravating circumstances of a female active the public sphere.

Lastly, evaluating whether the EU offers specific solutions for VAWIP allows for practical measures to address and mitigate this issue. This require more of the contextual understanding of the implications stemming from the legislations. Together, these criteria aim to provide a holistic view of the EU's commitment and effectiveness in tackling VAWIP.

Analysis

Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence

The Directive sets minimum standards for the Member States in preventing and combating violence against women. In several areas, the Directive is ground-breaking: as the sole EU legislation dealing with the GBV, it addresses the shared responsibility of the Member States in providing an effective framework for its combating. Thus, from the perspective of criterion 1, the Directive clearly recognises that GBV is a persisting manifestation of structural discrimination against women, resulting from historically unequal power relations between women and men.^{xxx}

Additionally, it applies intersectional lenses by recognising that the violence against women can be exacerbated where sex intersects with other grounds of discrimination such as race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, disability, and others (criterion 2).^{xxxi} The Directive requires the Member States to pay due regard to victims affected by such intersectional discrimination by taking specific measures. Related to GBV, the Directive has been criticised mainly for not including a harmonised definition of rape based on lack of consent, ^{xxxii xxxiii} which is an important missing piece of the puzzle for providing safety and sufficient protection in GBV.

Looking at criterion 3, the Directive recognises a public presence of women as a possible aggravating circumstance for the crimes listed in the relevant articles, including so-called “computer crimes”.^{xxxiv} This distinction was required by the European Parliament (EP), arguing that cyber violence particularly targets and impacts public figures.^{xxxv} As the EP explains, these attacks are not only targeting women, but also democracy, which is one of the distinct characteristics of VAWIP. The Directive also recognises the silencing effect cyber violence can have on women, hindering their societal participation.^{xxxvi}

Given the nature of the EU legislation, it does not really offer policy responses tailored for female politicians (criterion 4), but it requires the Member States to take the aggravating circumstances, including public presence, into account, when transposing the Directive. Whether the Member States will take the public presence of the female politicians into consideration will thus depend on the way how the Directive transposes into the national laws.

Proposals to extend the list of EU crimes

Commission's communication: A more inclusive and protective Europe: extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime

The European Commission adopted in 2021 the communication "A more inclusive and protective Europe: extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime" ("Communication").^{xxxvii} EU crimes are laid down in Article 83(1) of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)^{xxxviii} and they represent crimes for which the EU may establish minimum rules concerning the definition of criminal offences and sanctions applicable in all Member States. These types of crime are considered with a higher caution as they have cross-border dimension due to their nature or impact.

The Communication argues that the rise of hate crime and hate speech reached the level where fundamental values and rights of people in the EU are impacted, undermining the foundations of the EU. From the perspective of criterion 1, the Communication applies gender lenses by mentioning women as a specific group targeted by hate speech, and underlines the deleterious effect of such crimes on participation in public life.

The initiative was backed by the Council of the EU in 2022.^{xxxix} Most of the EU Ministers were in favour of the initiative, however, for the list of EU crimes to be extended, the unanimity amongst the Council of the EU is needed. Only after that the Commission can initiate an actual legislation extending the list, which needs to be again approved by the Council (and the EP).^{xl}

The EP supported the extension in a resolution adopted in 2024.^{xli} The resolution directly mentions an alarming level of hate speech against women in the public sphere and urges the Council to adopt the decision on the list extension so that the subsequent legislation can be initiated. However, the debate in the Council is stalled since 2022 and without their unanimous agreement, measures cannot be initiated.

These attempts were taking gender mainstreaming into account by highlighting the disproportional burden women face in the hate speech and hate crimes. However, from the position of criterion 2, the Communication mentions aggravating circumstance of the intersectional discrimination only very briefly.^{xlii} From the perspective of criteria 3 and 4, the Communication does not explore disproportional impact hate speech poses on female politicians.^{xliii}

The EP's resolution does not mention VAWIP or female politicians at all, but at least calls for enhanced protection for the targeted groups which could be potentially specified and tailored for female politicians, if the legislation was put forward.

European Parliament resolution of 16 September 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on identifying gender-based violence as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) TFEU

In 2021, the EP asked to extend the list of EU crimes to include GBV.^{xliv} In this resolution, the EP has recognised the need to protect women and LGBTIQ+ people from disproportionate violence they experience (fulfilling criterion 1). The resolution also adopts intersectional lenses in appreciating the diversity women and LGBTIQ+ people face, which can multiply the violence they experience (criterion 2). However, this resolution was not reflected in the legislation. Instead of proposing the list extension, the Commission proposed the above-mentioned Directive, which sets some minimum standards for GBV.

However, Belloni ^{xlv} argues that the EU crimes list extension would be a better option: having two legislations (EU crimes list and the Directive) dealing with similar issues (e.g. sexual exploitation and computer crimes) may confuse Member States as to which one to follow in the national legislation.^{xlvi}

From the perspective of criterion 3, the EP resolution emphasises women in politics as disproportionately affected by GBV, which represents an important step in addressing specificities of VAWIP. At the same time, the EP resolution does not dwell sufficiently into details of the targeted protection of women in politics nor does it explain how to address this disproportion with policy recommendations (criterion 4). Nevertheless, this initiative was a good start for a further discussion about GBV and its disproportionate impact on female politicians.

EP resolution on measures to prevent and combat mobbing and sexual harassment in the workplace, public spaces, and political life in the EU (2018)

The EP's initiative to prevent harassment in the workplace, public spaces and in political life was embodied in the resolution adopted in 2018.^{xlvii} From the perspective of my criteria, the vocabulary and ambition of the resolution are rather ground-breaking.

Taking criteria 1 and 2 into consideration, the resolution incorporates gender mainstreaming and intersectional lenses. It recognises sexual harassment as a form of gender-based discrimination and highlights the impact of new technologies used for cyber violence on women with public roles, recognising an intersectional discrimination of LGBTI, minority or women with disabilities.

Secondly, from the perspective of criterion 3, the resolution offers a contextual framework to understand VAWIP as a distinct phenomenon; it specifically recognises challenged legitimacy of women in public sphere facing stereotypes and discouragement from engaging in politics. The resolution starts from within the EP and calls for a task force to examine the situation of sexual harassment and abuse in the EP.

For Member States, it encourages awareness-raising campaigns and effective report systems for tracking cyberbullying.

Furthermore, the resolution recognises that women's legitimacy in political representation is challenged and that parliaments are usually lacking sufficient protection for female politicians. Whole part of the resolution is related to violence in political life and calls for actions to be taken on an individual and party level, offering policy recommendations to combat VAWIP (criterion 4).

However, the resolution does not acknowledge VAWIP as a threat to democracy by preventing women from participating. Nevertheless, this wording was the closest to the female politicians' protection I could find in the EU hard of soft law. For the future policy response of the EU, this is an adequate step that more work can be built on to ensure better protection of women in public sphere.

Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act)

The Digital Services Act (DSA) regulates online platforms to prevent from illegal and harmful online activities and protect consumers' rights while fostering innovation and competitiveness.^{xlviii} It imposes new obligations for online intermediaries and platforms according to their size and impact on the market. The ambition of the DSA is to establish a robust common framework for the benefit of all stakeholders; but the complexity of the digital economy might make it difficult to align all the interests.^{xlix}

Looking at the criterion 1, the most important is Article 34, focused on the risk assessment which requires very large online platforms and very large online search engines (i.e. those platforms and engines that have more than 45 million users per month)^l to analyse and assess any systemic risks stemming from the design or function of their services. The risk assessment should include four systemic risks and one of them is a negative effect in relation to GBV.

However, as Allen^{li} emphasises, if an intersectional approach is taken within the risk assessment under the DSA, the positive impact can be much broader (criterion 2). Allen also reminds that GBV exists in many shapes and forms, including actions that may not rise to the level of illegal conduct, but they still have a chilling effect on women's speech. Therefore, the DSA need to also address systemic risks that stem from non-illegal conduct and still result in abuses. This would require an engagement in a cross-sectional manner, with civil society engagement. Therefore, the potential to address more of the gender-based and intersectional discrimination within DSA exists, but the outcome will depend on the legislators' cooperation with the Member States and civil society, when implementing the policy.

Looking at the criteria 3 and 4, DSA is not talking about VAWIP specifically, but it offers some policy recommendations which can have a positive effect on combating GBV, if implemented sensibly in cooperation with the relevant parties.

Discussion

While the EU has recognised and addressed some aspects of VAWIP, significant gaps in legislation and policy remain. A unified approach, specific protections for female politicians, and comprehensive data collection are essential for effectively combating VAWIP and ensuring women's equal public participation. Table below (Table 2) summarises how each of the analysed policy reflects on the criteria set in the Methods.

Table 2. Summary of the analysis

| | Gender mainstreaming | Intersectional lenses | Contextual framework for VAWIP | Policy solutions for GBV and/or VAWIP |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence | Recognises GBV as structural discrimination against women | Addresses intersectional discrimination in violence, requires Member States to consider multiple discriminations | Identifies public presence of women as an aggravating circumstance, addresses cyber violence | Requires Member States to consider aggravating circumstances including public presence but lacks specific policies for female politicians |
| Extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime | Highlights women as targeted by hate speech, impacts on public participation | Brief mention of intersectional discrimination, lacks depth | Does not specifically address female politicians but recognises threats to female journalists | Lacks specific measures tailored to female politicians, potential for future elaboration if legislation is advanced |
| EP resolution on identifying gender-based violence as a new area of crime | Recognises disproportionate violence against women and LGBTIQ+ | Appreciates diversity and multiple discriminations but lacks depth | Emphasises disproportionate impact on women in politics | Calls for more discussion and actions but lacks specific policy recommendations |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| EP resolution on measures to prevent and combat mobbing and sexual harassment | Incorporates gender mainstreaming robustly, recognising sexual harassment as gender discrimination | Recognises intersectional discrimination of women with disabilities, LGBTI, and minorities | Offers a strong contextual framework with specific recognition of VAWIP | Provides comprehensive policy recommendations focused on combating VAWIP within political life |
| Digital Services Act | Article 34 focuses on risk assessment including GBV effects | Potential for broader impact if intersectional approach is integrated during implementation | Does not specifically address VAWIP | Offers general policy recommendations which could help combat GBV if implemented with consideration of gender issues |

Policy recommendations

Based on this analysis, I offer policy recommendations for enhancing the protection of female politicians within the EU.

Under existing EU legislations

- **Directive on Violence Against Women:** The EU should emphasise the need for a distinct framework for female politicians during the Directive's transposition to address democratic threats posed by VAWIP. The EU should encourage Member States to recognise the aggravation of GBV against public figures.
- **EU Crime List Extension:** The EU should consider extending the list of EU crimes to include hate speech, hate crime, and GBV. Firstly, however, it is needed to analyse which approach (current Directive vs. EU crime list extension) is more impactful. Given the lack of support for the EU crime list extension and support for the gender policies comes from the Council, more targeted collaboration with the Member States representations is needed.
- **Artificial Intelligence Act:** Further analysis is needed of the impact of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act,ⁱⁱⁱ adopted in March 2024, on GBV and VAWIP, especially concerning AI-generated cyber violence. Additional protections may be needed to address non-consensual AI-generated content.

- **Digital Services Act:** As EIGE suggests, gender-disaggregated data collection system is needed for the risk assessment introduced in DSA.^{liii} Gendered disinformation campaigns have direct impact on VAWIP, as they often include false narratives or portray women as not being qualified for the position.^{liv}

Additional recommendations

- **Gender Equality in the Commission:** The EU should ensure the new European Commission (2024-2029) maintains a focus on gender equality. The president of the EU Commission is currently facing a challenge with Member States disregarding her request to submit both a female and a male candidate for Commissioner nominations, which is an additional step back for the gender equality.^{lv} The Commission should preserve the gender equality portfolio for the next mandate and ensure the continuous work on combating GBV and VAWIP.
- **Follow-up on VAWIP Report:** The EU should encourage follow-up on the VAWIP-related report by the European Parliament's think tank^{lvi} to further address issues such as the chilling effect on female politicians. Additional technical cooperation with EIGE should be emphasised, particularly on cost of GBV in the EU^{lvii} which could allow for a better understanding of the associated costs of this phenomenon and support the Member States and the EU in making informed decisions regarding the resource allocation.
- **Cooperation and Best Practices:** The EU should strengthen cooperation with external bodies like the Inter-Parliamentary Union^{lviii} and the OSCE.^{lix} The EU should also enhance their partnerships with the United Nations, including UN Women, through their existing platforms^{lx} ^{lxi} for targeted actions and effective policy solutions in combating GBV and VAWIP.

Conclusion

While the EU has made commendable progress in addressing GBV, its response to VAWIP remains insufficient. The existing legislative framework lacks specificity and fails to fully protect female politicians from targeted violence. To ensure a more inclusive and democratic political environment, the EU must adopt a more comprehensive approach that includes specific protections for women in politics, enhanced data collection, and international collaboration. Only through these measures can the EU effectively combat VAWIP and uphold its commitment to gender equality and democratic representation.

TOWARD EFFECTIVE POLICY RESPONSES: IDENTIFYING PRIMARY PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Isatou M. Bokum

Abstract

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) is a distinct and pervasive form of violence that remains inadequately documented and understood, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Despite increasing global awareness, it is largely hidden and, as a result, often unrecognised by many women and society.^{lxii} Studies on this phenomenon in SSA are sparse, and existing literature often generalises the political violence experiences of women without exploring the unique socio-political contexts of different regions.^{lxiii} Furthermore, most research has not critically examined who the perpetrators of VAWP are. To close these gaps, this study identifies the primary perpetrators of VAWP in Sub-Saharan Africa by thoroughly examining the existing literature and providing accounts of their actions and behaviours. The survey data is then analysed using social identity theory (SIT) to gain a deeper understanding of how group identities and power dynamics impact the motivations of these perpetrators and inform policy responses to tackle VAWP on the continent.

Introduction

Violence against women in politics (VAWP) can take various forms around the world, including physical, psychological, and economic abuse. Gender equality and democratic processes are under threat due to this widespread issue, and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is not an exception. While the proportion of women in political leadership has increased globally, it is still far lower in SSA. This difference mainly stems from the fact that cultural norms and societal prejudices that disparage and target women in politics or those who wish to work in the field make it more difficult for women to effectively represent their communities. An Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) survey from 2016 found that violence against female parliamentarians is frighteningly common in 39 nations, including 18 in Sub-Saharan Africa. 81% of these lawmakers stated they had been victims of psychological abuse,^{lxiv} and 20% of respondents reported having been subjected to sexual harassment at work, and 25% reported physical hostility.^{lxv}

The first section of the study provides context for the prevalence of VAWP in the political environment of SSA, emphasising the consequences of women's participation in governance and policymaking. The study identifies the primary VAWP perpetrators and offers descriptions of their actions and behaviours through a thorough literature review.

The paper then analyses this data by employing Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a theoretical framework, providing insight into how group identities and societal norms shape the perpetrators' motivations and offering a deeper understanding of the personal and collective forces at play. The paper then concludes by utilising the findings to inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations to address and mitigate VAWP, fostering a more inclusive and equitable political environment in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Research Question

The main research question driving this study is: Who are the primary perpetrators of violence against women in Sub-Saharan Africa's political sphere, and what are the particular actions or behaviours they use, along with their underlying motivations?

DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS (VAWP)

The term violence against women (VAW) describes acts of gender-based violence that take place in both public and private settings, which may include threats, coercion, and deliberate denial of someone's freedom. These behaviours either or already have the potential to cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm to women.^{lxvi} A subgroup of VAW known as Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) focuses on women who are involved in politics, whether they are candidates or holding offices. UNDP and UN Women define this as "any act, or threat, of physical, sexual or psychological violence that prevents women from exercising and realising their political rights and a range of human rights."^{lxvii} This includes threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, regardless of whether the events occur in public or private spheres, in families, amongst political parties, in society, or at the state level during their political career.^{lxviii}

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework

This research's theoretical framework is grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), which provides a comprehensive explanation of the dynamics that underlie VAWP. This theory was developed by Henri Tajfel in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It offers a foundational perspective that challenges traditional views of intergroup dynamics, which often focus on tangible resource competition or individual differences like authoritarianism.^{lxix} SIT introduces a key concept: individuals continuously shift between personal and social identities, from emphasising their unique traits to focusing on their commonalities with group members. This framework underscores that one's identity, whether personal or collective, significantly influences behaviour and interactions. The theory posits that

people categorise themselves and others along a continuum from "me" (self) to "us" (ingroup), with the salience of these identities shaping their attitudes and actions.^{lxx}

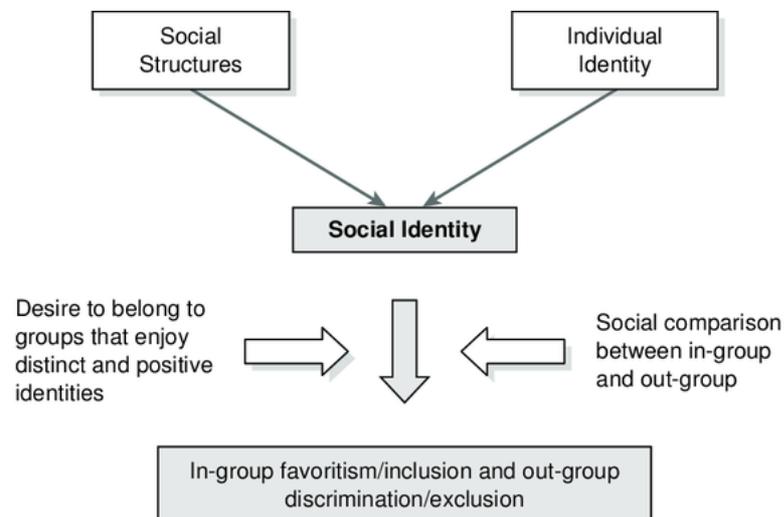


Figure 1. A Schematic Diagram of Social Identity Theory's Basic Principles

Methodology

This study employed a comprehensive literature search methodology to identify the primary perpetrators of VAWP. This process involved searching multiple primary databases, including African Journals Online (AJOL), PubMed, JSTOR, and Google Scholar for academic publications and peer-reviewed journals. In addition to journal searches, other independent publications, briefs and reports from reputable organisations, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the African Parliamentary Union, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), UN Women, and other international think tanks, were also reviewed.

A set of precise keywords and search terms intended to represent the scope and depth of VAWP were used to conduct the literature search. These phrases include but are not limited to "**Perpetrators of VAWP**," "**Sub-Saharan Africa**," "**Gender-Based Violence in Politics**," "**Political Violence Against Women**," "**sexist harassment in politics**," "**sexual harassment in politics**," "**violence against women in politics**" with "**motivations of VAWP in Africa**". These phrases were chosen to cover a range of VAWP dimensions, guarantee a thorough search, and incorporate a variety of viewpoints and results. The primary focus of this research was studies that examined various forms of violence against women in politics in SSA and included information on the perpetrators or motivations behind VAWP in this region published during the last ten years.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) guided the analysis by framing how group dynamics and social identities influence perpetrators' actions. The application of SIT ensured a nuanced exploration of the interplay between psychosocial factors and political dynamics in shaping VAWP. This theoretical framework allowed for a comprehensive analysis of how internal psychological factors, cultural norms, and political rivalries intersect to influence violent behaviours against women in politics.

Overview of VAWP Perpetrators and their Actions

This section presents a comprehensive examination of the primary perpetrators of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) in Sub-Saharan Africa, drawing on data from the literature survey. It identifies the key actors involved and provides insights into their specific actions and behaviours. The overview highlights various forms of violence perpetrated by these individuals, including physical and psychological abuse, as well as economic sabotage.

Primary Perpetrators of VAWP in Sub-Saharan Africa

VAWP is especially severe in Sub-Saharan Africa due to peculiar sociopolitical factors, such as deeply embedded social norms and unstable political environments. According to data gathered from 224 women across 50 African countries, including 137 parliamentarians and 87 parliamentary staff members by the IPU and African Parliamentary Union (APU), 80% of women parliamentarians have encountered psychological violence during their political tenure. 67% of them faced sexist behaviour or remarks, online sexist attacks targeted 46%, and 42% received explicit threats of violence directed at them or their families.^{lxxi} Additionally, 39% reported experiencing intimidation or psychological harassment. Furthermore, the study highlights that 39% of women parliamentarians have also endured sexual violence, with 40% experiencing sexual harassment and 9% subjected to sextortion—requests for sexual favours in exchange for political favours. Physical violence affected 23% of these women, while 29% reported instances of economic violence, which included sabotage of their political campaigns or withholding of resources.^{lxxii}

VAWP can occur both offline and online, in public and private settings. The APU and the IPU research indicate that VAWP is perpetrated **mainly by male colleagues** within and outside their own parties.^{lxxiii} Male colleagues from the same political party have harassed women in 41% of cases, while those from different political parties have harassed them in 49% of cases.^{lxxiv} Additionally, a study in Zimbabwe revealed that men were the most violent posters in online spaces during elections, with a ratio of 3:1 when the sex of the poster could be identified.^{lxxv} This underscores the prominent role men play in perpetrating both in-person and online violence, further emphasising their substantial contribution to VAWP.^{lxxvi}

Actions and Behaviours

Perpetrators of VAWP exhibit a variety of behaviours and acts that stem from a desire to dehumanise, threaten, and eventually bar women from entering the political sphere. In 2013, Nairobi Governor Evans Kidero physically assaulted prominent politician and former member of the Nairobi parliament, Rachel Shebesh, following an argument.^{lxxvii} Similarly, the attack on Flora Igoki Terah, a candidate for the North Imenti constituency in Kenya in 2007 by three men, highlights the extreme measures perpetrators of VAWP can take. As a means of discouraging her from participating in politics, she was subjected to physical assault and coerced into consuming human waste.^{lxxviii} This horrifying act was a profound physical and psychological attack designed to humiliate and dehumanise her. She was eventually defeated in the bid for office, despite her fortitude and resolve to keep going, partly due to threats against her and the time she spent recovering in the hospital following the incident.^{lxxix}

Additionally, during the 2018 mayoral elections in Sierra Leone, Freetown Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyer faced a tremendous amount of violence and harassment; some rival candidates even physically attacked her. Even while serving as mayor, she continues to be the object of ongoing threats and harassment intended to undermine her power and status.^{lxxx} In Zimbabwe, Thokozani Khupe, the deputy president of the MDC-T, the largest opposition party, was assaulted twice by members of her party after she rejected co-vice president Nelson Chamisa's bid to head the party interim till Congress in 2019. Khupe reported facing physical violence and continuous harassment, including death threats, which significantly hindered her political activities.^{lxxxi} The study on online violence in Zimbabwe further illustrates the acute gendered nature of such violence, noting that political women were explicitly targeted with accusations of engaging in witchcraft.^{lxxxii}

Another form of violence that often goes unnoticed is economic violence, which can manifest in various ways, such as undermining political campaigns, withholding resources, or damaging property. In the IPU and APU study, 9% of respondents reported being denied funds they were entitled to, such as allowances and expenses for parliamentary missions. Additionally, 11% mentioned being refused parliamentary resources, like a car with a chauffeur, to which they were entitled.^{lxxxiii} The respondents shared that these economic obstacles typically arise when they seek higher-paid parliamentary positions or wish to participate in international missions. Furthermore, 15% of respondents indicated that their personal property had been vandalised or destroyed, usually by unknown individuals, but sometimes by political opponents who are mostly men.^{lxxxiv} These incidents occurred in private settings, political meetings, or election campaigns. The perpetrators aimed to weaken women's capacity to compete on an equal basis by targeting the financial underpinnings of their political careers.^{lxxxv}

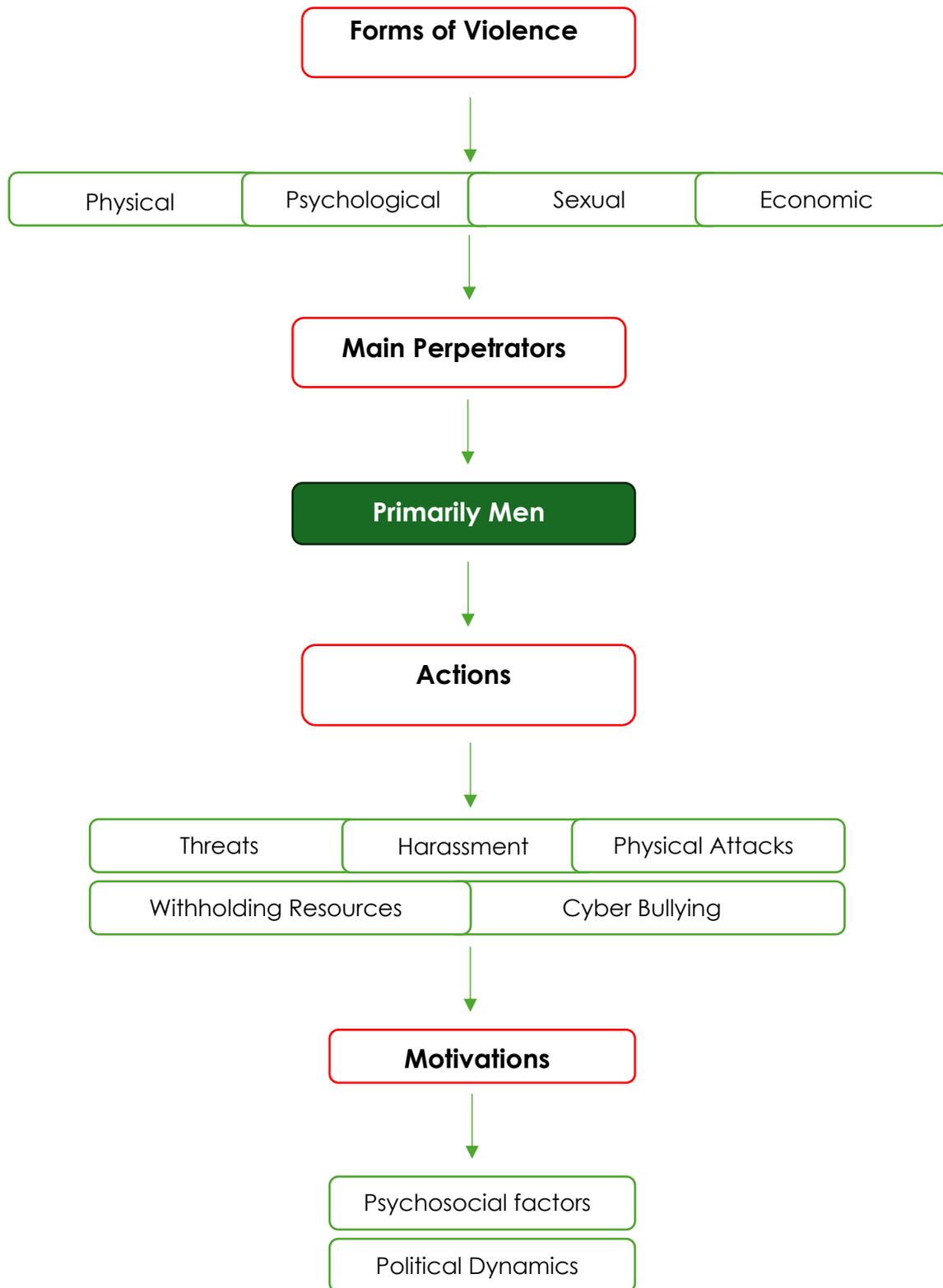


Figure 2. Forms of Violence, Main Perpetrators, Actions, and Underlying Motivations

Analysis and Discussion: Motivations for Perpetrators of VAWP

This section explores the underlying motivations of the primary perpetrators of VAWP, framed through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT), by categorising the analysis into two key areas: psychosocial factors and political dynamics. In the context of VAWP, SIT helps explain how perpetrators, predominantly men, view themselves as part of an ingroup while perceiving women politicians as out-group members. This distinction motivates their behaviours, often leading to acts of violence to reinforce the ingroup's dominance and suppress the out-group. SIT provides a critical lens for analysing how group dynamics and social identities contribute to the violence experienced by women in political roles, highlighting the role of identity salience in shaping intergroup conflict and aggression.

Psychosocial factors

The motivations underlying Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) can be better understood by applying SIT, which demonstrates how these behaviours are firmly anchored in the dynamics of ingroup and out-group relationships as well as the maintenance of hierarchical systems. It posits that individuals derive self-esteem and identity from their group memberships. For male perpetrators of VAWP, their identity and sense of superiority are closely tied to traditional gender roles where men are seen as dominant.^{lxxxvi} The status of men in this hierarchy is put in jeopardy when women enter politics and challenge these gender norms. Hence, in an effort to regain control over their group and preserve their place within it, some males may turn to violence. This is consistent with SIT's claim that behaviours intended to maintain ingroup advantages can result from threats to group status.

SIT also helps explain how cultural norms and societal expectations reinforce these behaviours. These norms and expectations frequently portray women's involvement in politics as a challenge to traditional gender hierarchies which reinforces male dominance and female submission. "Cultural tightness theory" explains this dynamic by illustrating that in "tight" cultures—where social norms are stringent, and sanctions for non-compliance are severe—women face more rigid constraints than men.^{lxxxvii} In such cultures, men are often afforded greater freedom and leniency, reinforcing their sense of superiority and entrenching traditional gender roles.

This sense of superiority is further reinforced by socialisation processes that deeply ingrain these norms, thereby shaping how men perceive their roles and interactions. This internalised framework often compels them to assert dominance and maintain a perceived superiority over women, grounded in biases that deem women less capable of leadership roles. This phenomenon, known as "gender role stress" or "masculine discrepancy stress," can escalate when men view successful women in politics as threats to their status and control, leading to acts of violence designed to preserve their hierarchical positions.^{lxxxviii} For example, the violence experienced by Flora Igoki Terah

was not merely a personal attack, but a symbolic act intended to dissuade other women from pursuing political office. Similarly, Yvonne Aki-Sawyer's experiences underscore how societal discomfort with women in leadership can manifest in aggressive efforts to undermine their authority and credibility.

Furthermore, SIT highlights how some male perpetrators might use violence as a strategic tool to maintain their political power and influence. They target women who hold prominent positions or wield significant influence to assert themselves as pivotal figures in reshaping political or organisational dynamics to their advantage. This approach can include efforts to discredit female rivals, thereby creating opportunities for personal advancement. It may also involve exploiting the ensuing disruption to gain political or economic benefits or positioning themselves as essential alternatives to the perceived threat posed by these women. This discourages women from participating in politics by making the social costs of defying gender norms appear prohibitively high.

Political Dynamics

In competitive political environments, i.e. a setting where multiple political parties or candidates actively contest for power, violence can become a strategic tool used to undermine female opponents. The high stakes of political competition, where power and influence are at play, incentivise some actors, especially men who consider themselves as members of the dominant ingroup, to use violence to gain or maintain an advantage over women whom they perceive as out-group members whose political success threatens their established status and power. This strategic use of violence highlights a broader pattern where political rivalries and power struggles are intensified by gender dynamics, with women being targeted to remove them from political contention and maintain male dominance in political arenas. This phenomenon is visible in political parties, as male colleagues frequently resist women pursuing leadership or influential positions. The attacks against Thokozani Khupe exemplify this dynamic in striking detail. She has endured violent attacks and continuous harassment from members of her own party, which highlights a concerning trend in political dynamics. These attacks were not random acts of violence but were strategically designed to discredit Khupe and obstruct her political ambitions. By targeting Khupe, her detractors aimed to reinforce male control over the party's leadership and preserve established power structures. The violence Khupe faced served a dual purpose: to publicly humiliate her and to send a clear message to other women about the potential repercussions if they held opposing views within the party. Such tactics are intended to deter women's engagement in politics, thereby maintaining male dominance and inhibiting the advancement of gender equality within the party. This strategic use of violence undermines individual women and perpetuates a broader culture of exclusion and intimidation in political arenas.

The exclusion of women from crucial party positions can also be enforced through covert means. A prominent example of this is economic violence, including sabotaging

campaign efforts and withholding resources. By undermining the financial foundations of female candidates' campaigns, perpetrators effectively prevent women from competing on an equal footing. This form of economic sabotage underscores the intersection of financial and political violence, exploiting existing gender inequalities to sustain male dominance within political parties. Such strategic use of violence reflects deeper systemic issues within party dynamics. It reveals how gender biases and competitive rivalries within political structures contribute to an environment where VAWP becomes a tool for maintaining male hegemony. The deliberate targeting of women through economic and political means highlights the entrenched nature of these practices, where internal party conflicts and gender-based discrimination work in tandem to reinforce male control and inhibit the advancement of women in political roles.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing VAWP requires a multidimensional and policy-focused approach. This includes closing the existing research gaps on perpetrators, strengthening legal frameworks, and enhancing training initiatives to ensure effective responses. Additionally, reinforcing institutional accountability, advocating for social and cultural change, and ensuring equitable access to political finance are critical for creating a supportive environment for women in politics.

Closing the Research Gap on Perpetrators of VAWP

There is currently a dearth of information about VAWP in Sub-Saharan Africa. Women who have been victims of political violence have not received the attention that their experiences need, and in particular, little is known about the characteristics of those who commit these acts of violence. A significant gap exists in the literature due to the conspicuous lack of a comprehensive examination of the psychological traits of perpetrators and the larger institutional and legal environments influencing their behaviour. The existence of this gap highlights the necessity of conducting more thorough research on the psychological characteristics—such as gender role stress or personal insecurities—that motivate perpetrators to commit acts of violence. Knowing these psychological aspects can help explain why they feel driven to act violently against women in political environments.

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Training Initiatives for Effective Response

According to international human rights laws, governments are legally required to protect women's rights to engage in politics and public life, to promote gender equality, and inclusive societies.^{lxxxix} Even with these internationally recognised standards, there are still power disparities between men and women in politics with increased violence. To guarantee women's rights to run for office, governments must

eliminate institutional obstacles, deal with gender norms that discriminate against women, and tackle the violence they face by passing national laws that criminalises explicitly violence against women in politics.^{x^c} This law should define violence against women in politics clearly, list all the acts that are covered by it in detail, and set down precise administrative, criminal, and civil penalties for perpetrators.

The law should be complemented with robust reporting and data-gathering mechanisms, provide detailed enforcement procedures and lay a solid legal foundation for prosecuting and adjudicating VAWP cases. A crucial aspect of this strategy should involve training police, security forces, administrative authorities, lawyers, and judges to ensure they know the intricacies of prosecuting perpetrators and compensating victims of VAWP. Additionally, establishing robust support mechanisms for victims, such as offering comprehensive assistance, from the process of reporting and legal representation to psychological support, will help them navigate the legal process and access justice.

Strengthening Institutional Accountability

This study has established that VAWP is very prevalent within political parties. Women in such situations refrain from discussing these incidents because they fear their commitment to the party and its rules might be doubted (i.e., 'what happens in the party stays in the party').^{x^{ci}} This calls for a need for **political parties** to strengthen their regulations by establishing and enforcing clear protocols that explicitly prohibit violence against women. This includes complementing national laws by creating internally secure mechanisms for reporting and addressing incidents of violence, which will ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. Suppose there are no safe, discrete, and secure channels for female politicians to report such incidents. In that case, they will continue to view the violence they encounter as a necessary cost of doing politics.

Similarly, **parliaments** should take an active role in overseeing politicians' behaviour, including setting up independent bodies to investigate allegations of VAWP so that political figures are not above the law and that there are consequences for acts of violence.

Social and Cultural Advocacy

Passing laws is critical for tackling violence against women in politics, but continuous advocacy to address the social norms that perpetuate such acts is equally necessary. Community sensitisation programs should be implemented to challenge and change harmful gender stereotypes and attitudes, promote gender equality, and encourage supportive behaviours towards women in political roles. These engagements should also target religious and opinion leaders, educational institutions, and media to help shift cultural perceptions to support women's political participation and create a supportive environment where they feel safer to report violence. In addition, training programs

focused on gender sensitivity should be introduced for male colleagues, party members, and political leaders. This can significantly enhance the effectiveness of prevention and response strategies and gradually help shift cultural attitudes that perpetuate VAWP.

Ensuring Equitable Access to Political Finance

It is vital to examine the role of political finance in VAWP. This is crucial because financial resources and their distribution significantly impact political dynamics and power structures. Politics is dominated not only by men but also by the wealthy, and this is not by accident. Men have more wealth, influence, authority, and power than women globally. They are more likely than women to fund and run for office due to disparities in resources between the sexes, which adds to the over-representation of men in politics.^{xcii} The discrepancy in political contributions based on gender impacts female candidates, as men are more likely to receive campaign funding, especially from other men. This calls for policy to focus on addressing the barriers to access to finance for women in politics. It is essential, therefore, to integrate policies that ensure transparent and fair access to political finance, such as public funding allocations for women candidates and measures against economic violence. These would mitigate women's financial challenges and signal a commitment to gender equality in political representation.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the widespread problem of VAWP in Sub-Saharan Africa, revealing its adverse effects on women and the root causes of such violence. The study finds that men, most importantly male politicians, are the primary perpetrators of VAWP both within and outside political parties. These perpetrators use a variety of abusive tactics, including economic, psychological, and physical abuse, to discredit and impede women in politics.

The motivations behind VAWP are deeply rooted in both psychosocial factors and political dynamics. Social Identity Theory elucidates how ingrained gender norms and hierarchical structures drive male perpetrators to use violence as a means of maintaining their perceived superiority and dominance. This violence serves not only to reinforce traditional gender roles but also to strategically undermine women's political influence and power. The study highlights that male perpetrators often view women politicians as threats to their status and use violence to preserve their control within political spheres.

A few significant recommendations have been proposed to address these problems. First, a more in-depth study is required to develop complete profiles of the perpetrators, including their psychological traits, political connections, and socioeconomic origins. In

addition, there is an immediate need to strengthen institutional accountability, maintain ongoing social and cultural activism, and develop adequate legal frameworks and training programs. It is also imperative to address the financial inequalities in political finance. We can promote gender equality, build democratic processes in the region, and create a fairer and more encouraging atmosphere for women in politics by concentrating on these interrelated issues.

GLOBAL PHENOMENON, NATIONAL RESISTANCE: EXPLORING U.S. LEGISLATIVE CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

Jaclyn Corin

Abstract

This paper examines the legislative challenges in addressing violence against women in politics (VAWIP) in the United States by comparing the legislative processes behind the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 and H.Res.220, introduced in 2023. Despite growing global recognition of VAWIP, U.S. efforts have lagged, as evidenced by the failure of H.Res.220 to progress in Congress. The analysis shows that increasing partisan polarization has significantly eroded the bipartisan cooperation that once supported legislation like VAWA. Unlike VAWA, which benefitted from being part of a broader crime bill and was framed as a nonpartisan public safety issue, H.Res.220 was hindered by today's polarised climate. The resolution, which addresses VAWIP, encountered substantial challenges due to deep ideological divides, making it difficult to garner necessary support.

While a lack of other factors—such as societal recognition, party backing, and advocacy—also contributes to these challenges, their absence is largely driven by deepening polarization, which shifts the discourse on what constitutes violence and whose protection is prioritised. The paper underscores the need for strategic approaches, including building bipartisan coalitions, effective framing, and stronger advocacy networks, to advance VAWIP legislation. The paper concludes by highlighting the necessity of adapting legislative strategies to navigate a polarised political environment. Insights from the successes of VAWA and the obstacles faced by H.Res.220 offer valuable guidance for future efforts to advance VAWIP legislation, emphasising its importance for protecting and empowering women in politics, and ensuring their full participation in democratic processes.

Introduction

In October 2022, amid rising political tensions, an intruder armed with a hammer broke into the San Francisco home of Nancy Pelosi, then-Speaker of the House, shouting, “Where’s Nancy?” Unable to find her, the assailant brutally attacked her husband, Paul Pelosi, inflicting severe head injuries that required surgery.^{xciii} This violent intrusion, fuelled by narratives of political and gendered hostility towards the former Speaker,^{xciv} exemplifies the threats female politicians face in the United States.

While other nations, such as Bolivia,^{xcv} Mexico,^{xcvi} the UK,^{xcvii} ^{xcviii} and Canada,^{xcix} have made strides to address violence against women in politics (VAWIP), the U.S. has failed to take legislative action. H.Res.220, introduced in 2023 during the 118th Congress, aimed to recognise VAWIP as a global phenomenon, but faced significant legislative hurdles and was never brought to a vote.^c

The U.S. political landscape is fiercely polarised, with ideological chasms dividing liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans.^{ci} Hostility between and within parties has sparked political violence, notably the January 6th insurrection, where right-wing extremism fuelled efforts to disrupt democratic processes.^{cii} This atmosphere of political violence uniquely impacts women in politics, who face targeted attacks driven by both political and gender-based animosities.

This paper explores why efforts to address VAWIP in the U.S. have struggled, using a comparative analysis of the legislative processes behind the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994^{ciii} and H.Res.220 in 2023. I argue that increasing partisan polarization in U.S. politics has made gender-specific legislation like H.Res.220 more vulnerable to failure, fundamentally altering the dynamics that once supported bipartisan cooperation on violence against women. While a lack of other factors such as societal acknowledgment, party support, and advocacy also play a role, their absence stems from deepening polarization, which shifts the discourse around what constitutes violence and whose protection is prioritised. Unlike in 1994, when VAWA gained support by framing domestic violence as a public safety issue, today’s polarised environment hampers legislation seen as aligned with progressive agendas. However, passing H.Res.220 is crucial—not just as a legislative victory, but as a pivotal step toward shifting this discourse and promoting a safer and more equitable democratic environment.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows: First, I review the literature on the definitions of VAWIP and discuss its global prevalence. Next, I provide an overview of the U.S. political context and legislative processes during the passage of VAWA and the introduction of H.Res.220. Following this, I conduct a comparative examination of the legislative journeys of VAWA and H.Res.220, analysing the factors that influenced their outcomes. Finally, I propose policy solutions informed by my research.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Definition of VAWIP

Violence against women in politics (VAWIP) has gained significant global attention, yet its definition and recognition as a distinct phenomenon remain debated. Krook and Sanín define VAWIP as encompassing physical violence (such as assaults and threats), psychological violence (including intimidation, harassment, and emotional abuse), and symbolic violence (such as sexist remarks and biased media portrayals) aimed at deterring women from political participation.^{civ} Although symbolic violence may be less visible, it is equally damaging, as it reinforces male dominance and undermines women's legitimacy in politics.^{cv} Kuperberg encourages an intersectional perspective, noting that women of colour and those from marginalised communities face compounded forms of aggression, making the issue of VAWIP more complex.^{cvi}

However, scholars like Piscopo challenge the notion of VAWIP as a distinct category, arguing that it can be subsumed under broader political and societal violence. Piscopo challenges the uncritical acceptance of activist definitions and warns that framing VAWIP as a separate issue overlooks the interconnectedness of various forms of political violence, leading to fragmented policy responses.^{cvii}

Despite these debates, I proceed with the perspective that VAWIP is a distinct phenomenon. Acknowledging VAWIP as a stand-alone issue ensures that the unique dynamics of gendered violence in politics are addressed, while still allowing for broader political violence to be tackled comprehensively within the legislative framework.

Global Prevalence of VAWIP and Legislative Measures

While the concept of VAWIP is relatively new, its existence is well-documented across various political systems. In the United States, women officials are targeted 42.5% of the time, making them 3.4 times more likely than men to experience threats and harassment when accounting for their representation.^{cviii} Women of colour face even higher rates of sexist abuse in the U.S., particularly in local races.^{cix}

In Latin America, female politicians in countries like Bolivia, Mexico, and Brazil face significant levels of violence driven by cultural norms that reinforce traditional gender hierarchies.^{cx} Coupled with weak criminal justice systems, this environment allows such violence to persist largely unpunished,^{cxii} deterring women from engaging fully in political life.

The global scope of VAWIP is further underscored by data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). In a 2018 report, the IPU revealed that 85% of female Members of Parliament (MPs) in Europe—including those from stable democracies—had

experienced psychological violence, and a significant number faced sexual and physical violence during their careers.^{cxii} In Africa, a 2021 report shows that 80% of women parliamentarians experienced psychological violence, with 39% facing sexual violence, often within parliamentary premises.^{cxiii}

In response to VAWIP, several countries have introduced legislative measures aimed at addressing the problem. Bolivia's Law 243 criminalises violence against female politicians, setting a precedent for comprehensive legislative frameworks.^{cxiv} Similarly, the UK^{cxv} and Canada^{cxvi} have implemented parliamentary or political party codes of conduct to address the problem. International bodies, including the United Nations and the IPU, have recognised VAWIP as a critical issue and advocated for stronger legislative protections worldwide.^{cxvii cxviii}

The global prevalence of VAWIP profoundly impacts women's political participation, deterring many from entering or continuing in politics.^{cxix} This underrepresentation weakens democratic principles of equal participation and perpetuates gender inequality, further entrenching male dominance.^{cxx cxxi}

Methods

This study employs a comparative case study approach, examining the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 and H.Res.220 in 2023. Both legislative efforts address violence against women (VAW) but differ in political contexts and outcomes, providing insights into how varying environments and strategies influence legislative success. My hypothesis is that increasing partisan polarization in U.S. politics has made gender-specific legislation like H.Res.220 more vulnerable to failure by altering dynamics that once supported bipartisan cooperation on such issues. Although a lack of factors like societal acknowledgment, party support, and advocacy also plays a role, their absence is largely influenced by polarization, which reshapes the discourse on what constitutes violence and whose protection is prioritised.

VAWA was selected for comparison as the most comprehensive U.S. law addressing VAW, specifically domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.^{cxii} Despite the existence of other laws that address VAW, VAWA's impact on U.S. policy makes it a key case for this analysis.

Two important limitations arise in this comparison. First, VAWA was part of a comprehensive crime bill, which facilitated broader support by embedding it within a widely prioritised issue. In contrast, H.Res.220 is a standalone, non-binding resolution, and its symbolic nature and the contentious issues it addresses in a polarised environment contributed to its legislative challenges. Second, VAWA focuses on clearly defined criminal forms of violence, while H.Res.220 specifically addresses VAWIP,

including more nuanced and less recognised forms of violence, such as online harassment and violence perpetrated by and against politicians themselves.

While these limitations make direct comparison between VAWA and H.Res.220 challenging, they also underscore the study's relevance. The structural differences between the two cases highlight the importance of legislative context and the challenges posed by today's polarised political environment, while the difference in the types of violence addressed underscores the need to adapt strategies to an ever-changing political landscape.

Comparative Case Study: Violence Against Women Act and H.Res.220

Overview of the U.S. Political System

The U.S. legislative process begins when a bill or resolution is introduced by a member of Congress and referred to relevant committees—controlled by the majority party—for review, amendment, and approval. If passed by the committee, the bill is debated and voted on by the full chamber. To become law, a bill must pass both the House and Senate and be signed by the President, whereas a resolution, which expresses the sentiment or opinion of Congress, does not have the force of law and typically does not require Presidential approval.^{cxxiii}

Political polarization, characterised by deep ideological divides between and within the Democratic and Republican parties has become a hallmark of contemporary U.S. politics. This polarization often leads to legislative gridlock, particularly on issues related to gender, where partisan divisions are especially pronounced.^{cxxiv} In this environment, legislation introduced by minority party members faces significant hurdles and is less likely to advance.^{cxxv}

In the early 1990s, the political climate was more conducive to bipartisan cooperation, especially on public safety measures, reflecting the public's nonpartisan concern over rising crime rates.^{cxxvi cxxvii} This environment facilitated the passage of VAWA with significant bipartisan support.

After 2000, polarization deepened due to the nationalization of state politics, partisan redistricting, and the mobilization of interest groups, with divisions not only between parties but also within them.^{cxxviii} This culminated in the extreme polarization of 2023, marked by intense debates over social issues like reproductive rights and gender equality.^{cxxix cxxx} The aftermath of the January 6th Capitol insurrection and a contentious 2022 midterm election further entrenched these divides, making bipartisan cooperation exceedingly rare. The cultural and political conflicts of the time, often framed in zero-sum terms,^{cxxxi} created an environment where gender-related legislation was viewed through the polarised lens of cultural battles.

Legislative Process of Violence Against Women Act (1994)

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 is a landmark piece of legislation in the U.S.'s efforts to address domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of gender-based violence. VAWA established new legal protections for victims, enhanced the criminal justice response to VAW, and provided federal funding for services such as shelters, crisis centres, and legal aid.^{cxxxii}

The passage of VAWA was driven by a coalition of bipartisan lawmakers, advocates, and grassroots organizations. Then-Senator Joe Biden played a central role, championing the bill as part of a broader crime initiative. As the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Biden worked with advocacy groups, including the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), to craft a bill that provided comprehensive protections for female victims. Alongside Biden, key supporters included Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican, and Representative Pat Schroeder, a Democrat, both of whom were crucial in securing bipartisan backing.^{cxxxiii}

VAWA's legislative journey began in the early 1990s, amid growing public concern about domestic violence and sexual assault. Initially introduced in 1990, the bill struggled to gain support due to opposition to a provision allowing victims to sue attackers, as well as some lawmakers' lack of awareness of the issue's severity and concerns about expanding federal involvement.^{cxxxiv cxxxv} Over the next few years, advocates and lawmakers built a bipartisan coalition, framing the issue as one of public safety and moral responsibility, rather than a partisan concern.^{cxxxvi} Reintroduced in 1993, VAWA gained momentum through Senate Judiciary Committee hearings led by Biden, which featured testimony from survivors, law enforcement officials, and experts. These hearings were pivotal in rallying support.^{cxxxvii}

After passing through the Judiciary Committee, the bill faced Senate floor debates, particularly over funding and federal intervention. Despite these challenges, VAWA passed with bipartisan support in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, and was ultimately incorporated into the larger Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994.^{cxxxviii}

Legislative Process of H.Res.220 (2023)

H.Res.220, introduced in the 118th Congress by Representative Rashida Tlaib—whose far-left stance often puts her at odds with the broader Democratic Party^{cxxxix}—aimed to recognise VAWIP as a global phenomenon. The resolution aimed to align U.S. policy with international standards, acknowledging the prevalence of VAWIP and urging the U.S. government to adopt policies that promote women's political participation and mitigate such violence domestically and internationally.^{cxl} Introducing it as a resolution,

rather than as a bill, likely reflected a strategic choice, given that resolutions are often perceived as easier to pass due to their non-binding nature.

H.Res.220 was not an isolated attempt; it followed nearly identical resolutions introduced by Representative Tlaib in the 116th^{cxli} and 117th Congresses,^{cxlii} reflecting ongoing efforts to highlight VAWIP despite encountering the same obstacles that would later hinder H.Res.220. After H.Res.220's introduction, the resolution was assigned to the House Foreign Affairs and Judiciary Committees, both controlled by the Republican majority.^{cxliii} This dual referral complicated the legislative process, as the resolution had to navigate the distinct priorities and political dynamics of each committee.^{cxliiv} Additionally, as a minority party initiative, H.Res.220 faced inherent challenges, as resolutions from minority members typically struggle to advance in Congress.^{cxliv}

Ultimately, H.Res.220 stalled in committee, reflecting the broader difficulties of advancing gender-specific legislation in today's polarised Congress. Despite growing global recognition of VAWIP, the resolution's failure to gain momentum in a U.S. context underscores the challenges posed by ideological divides and the contentious nature of gender-related issues, further complicating efforts to secure bipartisan support.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the legislative journeys of VAWA in 1994 and H.Res.220 in 2023 reveals the shifting political dynamics and the factors influencing legislative success. A major difference between the two is the level of bipartisan support. In 1994, lower political polarization allowed bipartisan coalitions to form more easily around issues like public safety.^{cxlvi} VAWA benefitted from the cooperation of key players from both parties, including then-Senator Joe Biden, a Democrat, and Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican.^{cxlvii} Although the bill faced debates over funding allocations and the scope of federal intervention, these challenges were overcome, and VAWA passed with strong bipartisan support.^{cxlviii} Notably, both Biden and Hatch were able to garner bipartisan support in a political climate where male politicians often held greater influence, particularly in areas like public safety.^{cxlix}

In contrast, H.Res.220 was introduced in 2023 during a period of intense political polarization, where deep ideological divides between Democrats and Republicans made bipartisan cooperation exceedingly rare.^{cl} Sponsored by Representative Rashida Tlaib and co-sponsored only by female, non-white members of the 'Squad'—a progressive group of mostly women who have frequently been the targets of verbal harassment by conservative politicians^{cli}—H.Res.220 was introduced in an atmosphere charged with partisan tension, particularly on issues related to gender and identity.^{clii} Given the sponsors' identities and the resolution's content, it was inevitable that this legislation would be seen as highly partisan.

The legislative pathways of VAWA and H.Res.220 were shaped by markedly different contexts. VAWA's passage was eased by its inclusion in the broader Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, a major priority for the Clinton administration. This integration allowed VAWA to ride the momentum of the larger bill, smoothing over potential procedural challenges.^{cliii}

H.Res.220, however, faced a more fragmented legislative path. The resolution was referred to multiple committees, each with its own priorities and dynamics,^{cliv} which created additional layers of review.^{clv} The minority party status of its sponsor meant that the resolution faced significant obstacles in gaining traction within a Congress where the majority party controls the legislative agenda.^{clvi}

Advocacy was crucial to VAWA's success, with organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW)^{clvii} and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV)^{clviii} leading the charge. These groups leveraged the media's focus on domestic violence and crime in the early 1990s to build broad-based support, framing VAWA as a public safety issue.^{clix} Biden called the lack of action a "failure of our moral imagination," which intensified pressure on lawmakers and helped transcend partisan politics^{clx}

In contrast, advocacy efforts for H.Res.220 struggled in a more challenging environment. Despite increasing global recognition of VAWIP, the issue did not gain similar urgency in U.S. media. Rather than focusing on the unique, gendered nature of VAWIP, discussions in the U.S. frame the issue within the broader context of political violence, diluting the gender-specific threats faced by women in politics.^{clxi} Consequently, many organizations supporting women candidates avoid discussing VAWIP in public forums, further limiting its visibility. A representative from the National Women's Political Caucus noted that female candidates "do not want to victimise themselves,"^{clxii} a sentiment that likely extended to Capitol Hill, where legislators might have been hesitant to support a resolution so closely tied to their personal experiences, fearing it would be perceived as self-serving.

This analysis confirms that increasing polarization in U.S. politics has disrupted the bipartisan cooperation once crucial for addressing violence against women. VAWA's success in 1994 was possible due to a more collaborative environment, framing the issue as a universal public safety concern. In contrast, H.Res.220's focus on VAWIP in 2023 became mired in ideological divides, hindering its support. While a lack of factors like societal acknowledgment, party support, and advocacy also plays a role, their absence is largely shaped by deepening polarization. This underscores the paper's central argument: that polarization has made gender-specific legislation like H.Res.220 more vulnerable to failure.

Counterargument and Rebuttal

Some may argue that partisan polarization is not the primary reason for the failure of H.Res.220, pointing to other legislation that has passed during periods of deep political division. However, recognition-based legislation like H.Res.220, which focuses on acknowledging an issue rather than taking direct action, faces a uniquely high threshold in today's polarised environment. These efforts are often seen as symbolic and ideological, making them more vulnerable to partisan resistance. The challenges—such as limited bipartisan engagement and the lack of broader coalition-building—indicate that alternative strategies might have improved its chances of success.

My understanding of the resolution's failure is limited by the absence of direct insights from key stakeholders and discussions on Capitol Hill. Although I rely on observable trends and outcomes, which may not fully capture the legislative process's nuances, the consistent failure of similar resolutions suggests that polarization and ideological resistance are significant factors. Even without insider accounts, the broader dynamics of polarization appear to be the main obstacle to passing recognition-based legislation like H.Res.220.

In the current political climate, conservative ideology resists initiatives that highlight gender discrimination.^{clxiii} A resolution like H.Res.220, which seeks to formally acknowledge VAWIP as a global issue, is likely perceived by conservatives as endorsing identity politics and aligning with broader progressive movements, which they resist.^{clxiv} Recognising political violence, particularly against women in politics, is contentious when conservative and/or male politicians are often seen to downplay or even perpetuate such violence. This resistance makes it difficult for H.Res.220 to be taken seriously within conservative circles, where acknowledging the problem might be viewed as admitting complicity or validating critiques they prefer to avoid. Thus, the intersection of gender, systemic recognition, and the current political violence climate creates significant barriers to achieving bipartisan support for H.Res.220.

This ideological resistance also shapes public discourse, influencing how issues are prioritised by the electorate. In conservative circles, issues specifically affecting women are met with scepticism,^{clxv} and there is little public demand for addressing VAWIP. This lack of grassroots pressure reduces the likelihood of bipartisan support, as legislators are less motivated to champion issues that don't resonate with their voter base. The absence of public demand from conservative voters perpetuates legislative inertia, making it even harder to build the momentum needed to pass such resolutions.

Policy Solutions

The contrasting outcomes of H.Res.220 in 2023 and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994 highlight the need for strategic policy solutions to address VAWIP in today's polarised political environment. Implementing these strategies collectively will maximise their impact.

Building Support Across the Aisle

In a polarised Congress, building bipartisan coalitions is essential, as demonstrated by the success of VAWA in 1994.^{clxvi} Politicians like Representative Tlaib should engage moderate legislators from both parties who may be open to collaboration on public safety and democratic integrity issues. Cross-partisan working groups with lawmakers, advocates, and stakeholders can identify common concerns, making it easier to draft legislation with broad support. Involving the Democratic and Republican National Committees can align the legislation with broader party platforms, facilitating leadership support. To overcome ideological resistance, advocates might broaden the legislation's scope to include protections for all politicians while emphasising the unique challenges faced by women.

Strategic Framing, Messaging, and Media Engagement

The success of future VAWIP legislation depends on how the issue is framed and communicated across media platforms. Politicians, activists, academics, and journalists must present VAWIP not just as a gender-specific problem but as a broader issue of public safety, violence deterrence, and democracy. This framing can help mitigate ideological resistance and appeal to a wider audience, including conservatives concerned about crime and security. Utilising social media to spotlight personal stories of female politicians, alongside traditional media, can amplify the message and reach diverse demographics. Additionally, producing more evidence-based research is essential for demonstrating the scope of VAWIP and building a stronger case for legislative action. By strategically controlling the narrative, advocates can position VAWIP as a universal concern, enhancing the likelihood of legislative success.

Mobilising Advocacy Networks

Feminist movements played a pivotal role in the passage of VAWA in 1994, mobilising resources, building coalitions, and raising public awareness about the issue of domestic violence.^{clxvii} To advance VAWIP legislation, these movements must again take the lead. Integrating the issue of violence against women in politics into the broader feminist agenda, with targeted campaigns and advocacy, is essential. Learning from Latin American feminist movements, where VAWIP is widely recognised and

addressed—leading to legislative action in countries like Bolivia and Mexico—can offer valuable insights, especially in contrast to the relative indifference in the U.S.^{clxviii} Feminist organizations should prioritise VAWIP, mobilising their networks for stronger legislative protections through lobbying, public education, and coalition-building. Amplifying the voices of female politicians who have experienced VAWIP can also be powerful in raising awareness and building public support.

The passage of VAWA in 1994 was driven not only by feminist advocacy but also by the active engagement of male allies in Congress and beyond.^{clxix} Male allies can play a vital role in bridging ideological divides, advocating for the inclusion of women in politics, and challenging societal norms that perpetuate violence. By encouraging male legislators, public figures, and community leaders to speak out against VAWIP, we can normalise the conversation and build broader support. Advocacy should also focus on motivating male legislators to sponsor resolutions like H.Res.220, as their involvement would demonstrate a unified commitment to addressing violence against women in politics and significantly enhance the chances of advancing such legislation.

Strategic Legislative Manoeuvres

Navigating the legislative process in a polarised Congress requires strategic use of legislative procedures. The challenges faced by H.Res.220, including dual committee referrals and the minority party status of its sponsor, highlight the need for innovative approaches to advancing legislation that addresses VAWIP. Incorporating VAWIP into broader legislative packages, similar to how VAWA was included in the larger crime bill in 1994, can help build support by aligning it with other priorities. If legislation is stalled in committee, advocates could consider using a discharge petition to bring the bill or resolution directly to the floor for a vote, though this requires significant support.^{clxx}

Conclusion

The comparison between the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 and H.Res.220 in 2023 highlights the evolving challenges of advancing legislation addressing VAW in the United States. VAWA succeeded due to bipartisan support, its framing as a public safety issue, and strong advocacy, which helped it overcome partisan divides in a less polarised environment.

In contrast, H.Res.220 faced significant obstacles in an era of intense polarization, where deep ideological divides made coalition-building difficult. Its focus on VAWIP—a more complex and divisive issue—further compounded these challenges. Advocacy efforts were hindered by the broader framing of political violence, which obscured the specific challenges faced by women in politics, and by the reluctance of organizations and legislators to address VAWIP directly.

These cases underscore the importance of strategic framing, coalition-building, and targeted advocacy in advancing VAWIP legislation. The struggle to pass H.Res.220

highlights the need for innovative approaches that resonate across party lines. Learning from the successes of VAWA and the challenges encountered by H.Res.220 offers valuable insights for future legislative efforts, particularly in navigating the complexities of an increasingly polarised landscape. Applying these lessons can more effectively confront VAWIP and work toward a legislative framework that ensures protection and full participation for women in the democratic process.

Further research is essential to explore how the framing of VAWIP legislation can be optimised to overcome partisan divides. Understanding the influence of public opinion and media representation on legislative outcomes for gender-specific issues is also crucial to advancing VAWIP legislation.

Ultimately, the difficulties faced by H.Res.220 reflect broader societal shifts and the complexities of today's political landscape. Nevertheless, these challenges offer important lessons for future VAWIP legislation, emphasising the necessity of a more inclusive and equitable approach to political participation and protection.

SECURING DEMOCRACY: ENHANCING DIGITAL PROTECTION FOR WOMEN POLITICIANS IN PAKISTAN

Amna Baig

Abstract

Tech-facilitated violence against women in politicians (TFVAW-P) is a global phenomenon that undermines inclusive democratic practices by pushing women out of the political sphere. As with several countries, Pakistan contends with this issue, struggling to address the threats emanating from TFVAW-P, specifically the disruption of civic engagement of women politicians. This report investigates the effectiveness of Pakistan's legal system in addressing criminal instances of TFVAW-P, and proposes measures to reduce impunity for these acts. Since their identity as women is at the core of these offenses, the study employs a gender-centric framework to evaluate the justice system's response to TFVAW-P complaints through legal literature review, quantitative analysis of criminal complaints and resources, and interviews with legal practitioners, civil society members, and politicians.

The research concludes that: a) Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, (PECA), the existing law is inadequate to effectively address criminal complaints of TFVAW-P, b) the criminal justice system lacks sufficient capacity, both in terms of human and material resources, to manage the increasing caseload, and c) investigation and prosecution is severely impacted by the limited data sharing by social media platforms (SMPs), particularly when tech-facilitated violence is perpetrated through anonymous/unknown accounts. Considering the socio-political contexts, policy solutions include women-specific provisions in cybercrime law, increased resources for cybercrime units, and innovative partnerships with civil society to advocate for timely content removal and data sharing from SMPs. While the proposed recommendations may not address the problem holistically, they represent an imperative first step towards tackling the issue of impunity in criminal instances of TFVAW-P; ultimately promoting more equitable democratic participation by women politicians in Pakistan.

Acronyms

| Abbreviation | Full Terminology |
|---------------------|---|
| BSI | Basic Subscriber Information |
| CCW | Cyber Crimes Wing |
| FIA | Federal Investigation Agency |
| FIR | First Information Report |
| ICTs | Information and Communication Technologies |
| LEA | Law Enforcement Agency |
| MLAT | Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty |
| PECA | Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act |
| SMP | Social Media Platform |
| TFVAW | Tech-Facilitated Violence Against Women |
| TFVAW-P | Tech-Facilitated Violence Against Women in Politics |

Introduction

Tech-facilitated violence against women (TFVAW) has emerged as a significant challenge in the political sphere, particularly affecting politically active women^{clxxi}. TFVAW encompasses any act that leverages information and communication technologies (ICTs) or digital platforms to inflict, facilitate, or amplify harm against women, including physical, sexual, psychological resulting in social, political, or economic damage, as well as infringements on their rights and freedoms^{clxxii}. When directed at women in politics, this form of violence takes on additional dimensions, targeting individuals not only because of their gender but also with the specific aim of excluding them from the political sphere^{clxxiii}. The increasing reliance on digital platforms for political participation has exacerbated the vulnerability of women politicians to various forms of online abuse, including blackmailing, harassment, disinformation campaigns, and doxing^{clxxiv}. This trend of tech-facilitated violence against women in politics (TFVAW-P) poses a substantial threat to democratic processes, potentially deterring women's political participation and undermining the principles of equal representation^{clxxv}. As political discourse progressively moves online, addressing TFVAW-P has become crucial for safeguarding inclusive and equitable democratic systems worldwide^{clxxvi}.

TFVAW-P and its adverse impact on equal political participation^{clxxvii} is particularly severe in conservative, patriarchal societies where issues such as character assassination linked to honour poses significant risks to women politicians^{clxxviii}. A comparative study of South Asian countries found that fear of such violence is a serious concern for nearly 60% of women considering candidacy^{clxxix}. Social media trolls often target women's gender to challenge their authority, sometimes using religious arguments to delegitimise their participation^{clxxx}. In such contexts, entrenched cultural norms reinforce gender roles through direct and structural forms of violence which often go unprosecuted. This altogether fosters a culture of impunity, which frequently results in women being marginalised from political participation^{clxxxi}.

Pakistan, a predominantly Islamic country in the Global South, has experienced a substantial retreat of women from the political sphere due to the above-mentioned intersecting factors, and TFVAW-P^{clxxxii}. Overtime, instances of TFVAW-P have increased in both frequency and severity^{clxxxiii}, emerging as a major factor negatively impacting women's political participation^{clxxxiv}.

TFVAW-P encompasses conducts that may amount to criminal offenses and/or carry civil responsibility, yet the scope of this research is limited to its criminal manifestations^{clxxxv}. The penal acts, *generated or transmitted through technology*, include sharing of non-consensual private photos, AI-generated sexually explicit

content, cyberstalking, blackmailing, death and rape threats and doxing. etc., which results in serious psychological, physical, or material harm to women politicians^{clxxxvi}. Online violence perpetrated on social media platforms represents a fundamental component of TFVAW-P^{clxxxvii}.

In Pakistan, electronic crimes are regulated under Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, (PECA). PECA was enacted in 2016 for multiple reasons, one of which was to safeguard women in the digital sphere^{clxxxviii}. However, the Act has since drawn criticism for its inefficacy in attaining the aforesaid objective, and its alleged misuse as a governmental instrument to suppress dissent^{clxxxix}. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), the designated law enforcement organisation responsible for handling criminal complaints under the Act, has garnered a reputation for subpar investigations and prosecutions due to limited resources and capacity^{cx}. Similarly, the judiciary has drawn criticism for their lack of expertise^{cxci} and lengthy proceedings in cases related to electronic crimes^{cxcii}. The said deficiencies in Pakistan's criminal justice system contribute to persistent impunity for technology-facilitated violence against women in politics, thereby perpetuating a cycle of such abuse.

This report analyses the legal gaps and capacity issues in the criminal justice system of Pakistan and proposes policy solutions to enhance the State's^{cxci} response to tech-facilitated violence against women politicians.

Methodology

The primary methodology for this study involved conducting interviews with nine professionals, including representatives from law enforcement agencies, international legal experts in digital rights, female politicians, prosecutors, and human rights activists. This was supplemented by content analysis of existing literature and examination of case texts. To gather additional primary data, the study analysed 75 judgments and bail decisions in cybercrime cases^{cxci}, as well as relevant sections of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA).

Despite limited literature and the lack of publicly available data on registered complaints, the interviews yielded substantial figures regarding the nature and number of complaints (both processed and unprocessed) and the existing resource structure. The information obtained was augmented by reports and literature providing significant insights into policy issues at the implementation level. Moreover, the interviews were instrumental in deriving analysis from the experiences of officials at the forefront of handling TFVAW-P cases and implementing the law.

Analysis

The study evaluates the criminal justice system's overall capacity to address Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women (TFVAW) as a broader category^{cxv}. Within this framework, TFVAW-P is examined as a subset^{cxvii}, providing a balanced approach that offers both comprehensive understanding of the issue and actionable policy solutions.

The Law: in-between women's safety, criminal transgressions, and free speech

Background:

PECA was enacted to provide a legal framework to address criminal acts emanating from the rise of technology and the digital sphere^{cxvii}. Since its promulgation, the Act has drawn severe criticism on two fronts: a) it is too vague,^{cxviii} and b) this vagueness in criminal definitions has been used by the government to crack down on dissent^{cxix}.

The void-for-vagueness doctrine, a constitutional principle, requires that criminal statutes define offenses with sufficient clarity for the average person to understand, thereby preventing arbitrary application and ensuring fair notice of what actions are punishable by law^{cc}. The Pakistani Supreme Court recognises the importance of clarity in criminal statutes. In the landmark case *Zaheerudin v. State*^{cci}, the Supreme Court stated:

*"There may be no dispute about the proposition that if a law ... particularly, criminal, is **vague, uncertain or broad**, it must be **struck down as a void law**."*

The vagueness of PECA is evident in multiple sections where generic terms such as 'dishonest,' 'dissemination of information,' 'hatred,' and 'blocking of content if the authority considers' remain under-defined for legal purposes^{ccii}. Human rights advocates have reported that the Act is being utilised to censure opposition and suppress free speech^{cciii}. The judiciary has also taken notice of the vague terms of the Act. In 2022, while hearing petitions against PECA's criminalization of defamation that infringed on free speech, Chief Justice of a High Court struck down a portion of section 20 of the law for his jurisdiction. Specifically, he declared:

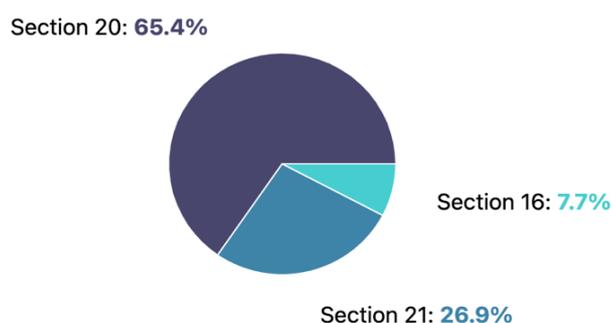
*"The offence under section 20 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, **2016 to the extent of the expression "or harms the reputation"** and the punishment thereof is unconstitutional, invalid beyond reasonable doubt and is, therefore, struck down"*^{cciv}.

The argument for free speech is fundamental to democratic societies; however, like most rights, it is not absolute, and it must be balanced when conflicting with other rights and freedoms. In cases of TFVAW, free speech must be weighed against the need to safeguard women from violence^{ccv}. When the Chief Justice struck down the phrase "harms the reputation" from section 20, he inadvertently left victims of TFVAW without

adequate legal recourse, particularly those who endure adverse implications on their safety^{ccvi}, social standing and civic engagement due to reputational damage^{ccvii}. The first step in effectively balancing free speech with TFVAW requires unequivocal recognition of this threat and its impact^{ccviii}.

Section Wise Analysis of PECA for TFVAW-P

PECA does not explicitly mention women/gender nor TFVAW, yet it contains sections that have been relevant, to an extent, for complaints of TFVAW-P. Since 2018, a total of 25 complaints have been registered by women politicians, with the majority falling under sections 16, 20 and 21 of PECA^{ccix}. These statistics likely underrepresent the actual prevalence of such cases, as many women politicians face barriers in reporting or choose not to come forward with their experiences of TFVAW-P^{ccx}.



Distribution of TFVAW-P Complaints under PECA Sections

Section 20, which criminalises 'Offences against dignity of a natural person,' includes intentional public display or transmission of false information that intimidates or threatens privacy, and accounts for **17 out of 25 complaints filed by women politicians**^{ccxi}. These complaints typically involve tech-facilitated harassment, intimidation and sharing of objectionable content on digital platforms. While most victims relied upon this section to file complaints, there are several issues that limit the successful investigation and prosecution of these acts.

A key limitation in the section is its focus on the *dissemination* of offensive content rather than the technology-facilitated nature of the crime. The legal terminology stipulates that offensive content must be "exhibited," "displayed publicly," or "transmitted" to be categorised as criminal^{ccxii}. This narrow focus falls short of addressing instances where perpetrators threaten to share objectionable content stored in digital devices without actually publishing or transmitting it. Resultantly, it fails to cover scenarios of technology-facilitated blackmail where the threat itself, rather than the act of sharing, constitutes

the crime^{ccxiii}. Additionally, the broad terms 'intimidates and privacy' in the section not only fall short of comprehensively capturing the essence of TFVAW but also set this concern against freedom of expression, making the section controversial altogether^{ccxiv}.

There are other legal challenges too; the crime under this section is non-cognizable, meaning that it requires a court order for the police to initiate an investigation,^{ccxv} which is a fairly lengthy process^{ccxvi}. Moreover, it is particularly problematic when complaints are made against unknown accused in digital spaces; restricted data sharing by social media platforms (SMPs) limits the identification of the accused, which more than often brings investigations to a standstill. Even in severe instances of online abuse or harm, complaints are not processed for prosecution due to account anonymity unless SMPs provide the back-end information^{ccxvii}.

Lengthy legal procedures and frequent unavailability of crucial identification data result in complaints of TFVAW-P rarely converting into prosecutable cases. Out of 17 complaints filed by women politicians under section 20 of PECA in the last six years, only 01 has been processed for prosecution^{ccxviii}.

Section 16, addressing 'Unauthorised use of identity information,'^{ccxix} prohibits obtaining, selling, possessing, transmitting or using another person's identity information. This section accounts for **2 out of 25 TFVAW-P complaints filed over six years by women politicians**^{ccxx}. It deals with cases of impersonation through fake profiles and their use for undertaking other criminal offenses such as doxing, sharing of non-consensual private photos, and sensitive personal information^{ccxxi} etc. Fake profiles are often used to malign women's social standing, leading to serious consequences in certain cases, specifically for female public office holders and politicians^{ccxxii}. However, the broad legal language of this section lacks a gauge for severity and specificity, bordering on criminalising certain acts of civil defamation. The generic categorization of offenses in the section renders serious crimes non-cognizable under law^{ccxxiii}. Consequently, victims of TFVAW, including women politicians, are left without adequate legal recourse, as their critical complaints are often conflated with less severe violations.

Similar to Section 20, Section 16 has several legal limitations. Being non-cognizable, it requires a court order to initiate an investigation. Even in complaints where a court order is obtained to investigate the case, data requests to SMPs are rarely fulfilled.

Due to the lengthy legal procedures and non-availability of data, the complaints rarely convert into prosecutable cases. Notably, according to the data, out of the 02 complaints filed under Section 16 of TFVAW-P in the last six years, neither has so far been prosecuted^{ccxxiv}.

Section 21 of PECA, which deals with 'Offences against modesty of a natural person and minor,' criminalises public exhibition, display, or transmission of sexually explicit content,

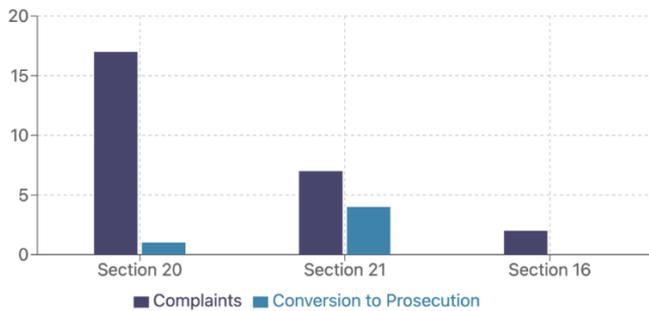
including intimate image abuse. This section is more heinous in nature and has seen an exponential rise in the number of complaints from women politicians in the recent years, specifically since the emergence of new tech-facilitated threats^{ccxxv}, such as AI generated deepfake content; 95% of sexually explicit deepfakes on the internet are illustrations of women^{ccxxvi}.

Out of 25 complaints of TFVAW-P received by FIA in the past six years, 07 were filed under this section. Most of the complaints primarily involved the victimization of women politicians through the sharing of deepfake sexually explicit photos and audios, non-consensual private photos and other objectionable content linked to the victims that severely harmed their reputation^{ccxxvii}.

An analysis of the data reveals that 03 out of 07 TFVAW-P complaints were not converted into prosecutable cases as the accounts that shared the offensive content were anonymous, and backend user information data was not provided by the concerned SMP – a limitation similar to section 20 and 16. Of the 04 complaints that were converted into prosecutable cases, 03 involved accounts of known persons, and 01 was registered by identifying the accused through the national identity database of Pakistan^{ccxxviii}.

Another legal issue with this section is the blackmail loophole underscored in the analysis of section 20. Instances where criminal content is not yet made public or transmitted, but is used to blackmail victims, fall outside this section's scope^{ccxxix}. Additionally, while the offense is non-compoundable under law - the victim cannot settle the case with the accused; approximately 90% of TFVAW cases registered under the section result in a compromise outside of the court due to various reasons, such as lengthy legal procedures^{ccxxx}.

Despite the section's relative clarity in defining the parameters of the offense, legal limitations related to TFVAW-P persist, including the section's focus on public sharing of content, which excludes complaints of blackmail from its purview. The primary issue, however, is limited data sharing by social media platforms that obstructs case registration against anonymous perpetrators^{ccxxxi}.



Grouped Bar Chart of PECA Complaints and Conversion to Prosecution

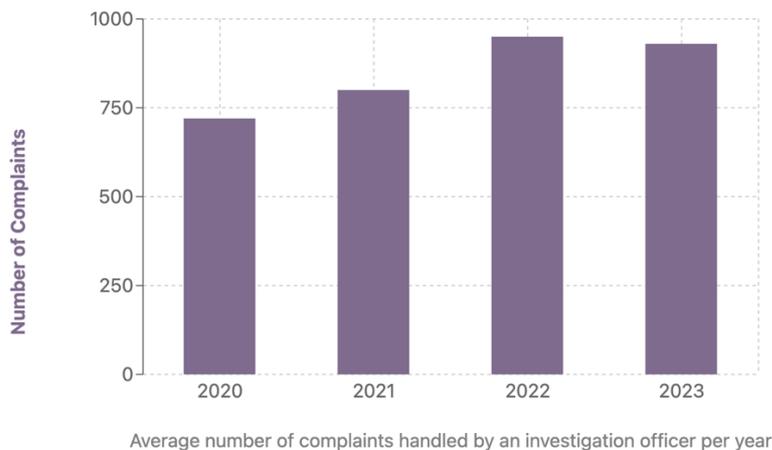
The Capacity: Investigation, Prosecution and the Courts

Federal Investigation Agency (FIA)

The FIA is the designated law enforcement body tasked with investigating offenses under PECA. Originally established in the 1974 to handle transnational and interprovincial crimes^{ccxxxii}, FIA's mandate was expanded to include electronic crimes upon PECA's promulgation, albeit without the provision of adequate human and material resources^{ccxxxiii}. In 2016, a hastily assembled subunit, Cyber Crimes Wing (CCW), was created within the FIA, staffed by investigators and technical experts hired on short-term contractual basis^{ccxxxiv}. Over the years, the FIA has been beset by allegations of inefficiency, corruption, and political interference^{ccxxxv}. While the CCW at FIA has developed some expertise in investigating complaints of electronic crimes, it lacks the required resources, capacity and training to manage the growing caseload effectively^{ccxxxvi}. Understanding and addressing the FIA's structural and operational challenges is a critical first step in improving access to justice and developing an effective response to the rising threat of TFVAW-P in Pakistan.

Human Resource Constraints

With only 144 investigation officers distributed across 15 police stations nationwide, the CCW faces substantial human resource constraints. An analysis of the available data from 2020 to 2023, demonstrates that each **officer manages an average of 848 complaints annually**. This excessive caseload, which has been steadily increasing over the years, negatively affects the quality and efficiency of investigations^{ccxxxvii}.



In the absence of credible investigative capacity due to limited human resources, when complaints related to TFVAW-P are assigned to already overburdened officers, without competence in handling gender-specific cases, the result is partial and substandard investigations^{ccxxxviii}. **Of the 25 complaints of TFVAW-P received by the CCW over the past six years, only 04 were converted into prosecutable cases.** While legal limitations and restricted access to user data contributed to this low conversion rate, lengthy investigative processes and inadequate human resources also significantly undermined the FIA's ability to address TFVAW-P related complaints.

Financial Resource Constraints

The CCW faces considerable operational challenges due to financial constraints. Access to services for complainants is severely restricted due to the in-person complaint verification requirement, with only 15 cybercrime police stations^{ccxxxix} serving Pakistan's population of 240 million^{ccxl}. This limited footprint is a result of inadequate initial and subsequent funding for the wing; budget allocations (in Pakistani Rs = Rupees) for setting up and operationalising CCW and its associated police stations occurred in three phases, **totalling Rs. 1,930,066,000^{ccxli} (approximately USD 7,018,500).**

This financial allocation proved insufficient for establishing a comprehensive CCW network within Pakistan. It only allowed for the sanctioning of 15 police stations and 533 staff positions, including the headquarters office, forensic lab, and regional police stations. At present, out of 533 sanctioned positions, only 419 staff members operate these facilities. The remaining 114 positions remain vacant due to recruitment delays^{ccxlii}. A recent amendment to PECA empowers local police stations to register and verify cases of electronic crimes, subsequently transferring investigations to the relevant CCW police stations^{ccxliii}. However, this amendment has not yet been implemented.

From 2018 to 2024, no specific investigation budget was allocated for the police stations; instead, investigation officers relied on ad hoc arrangements from auxiliary units to supplement their costs. Officers receive **Rs. 9,000 (USD = 32)** per month as an investigation allowance for all assigned complaints, averaging a **mere Rs. 1,080 (USD = 3.88) per verification, enquiry and investigation** conducted^{ccxliiv}. These financial constraints undermine the access to justice and quality of investigations, leaving many TFVAW-P complaints unresolved or under-addressed.

Prosecution and Courts

Unlike other police departments, the FIA has the advantage of hiring and retaining its own prosecution officers. This arrangement not only enables prosecutors to specialise in cases specific to FIA units/wings but also allows for enhanced coordination with investigating officers. However, the CCW faces a severe shortage of prosecutors, with only 7 assigned to 15 police stations nationwide. Each prosecutor manages an average of 250 cases across various courts^{ccxlv}, resulting in prolonged^{ccxlvii} and inefficient trial proceedings.

Additionally, problems exist within the court system. While the PECA mandated the establishment of special courts, existing courts were simply designated as PECA courts without providing any workload relief^{ccxlviii}. On top of this, the nominated courts lack the technical expertise necessary to fully understand the nature and process of electronic crimes, heightened by the vagueness of the Act^{ccxlviii}. Both these matters considerably strain the judicial process, resultantly impeding effective adjudication of PECA cases.

Social Media Platforms: in-between privacy and criminal cognisance

In the context of TFVAW-P, the interplay between SMP's policies and national legal frameworks leads to complications in legally proceeding against offenders. As discussed above, a fundamental issue is the prevalence of anonymous accounts perpetrating such violence. In the sample of **25 TFVAW-P complaints, 21 involved unknown accounts, while only 4 were from identifiable users**^{ccxlix}.

The process of obtaining back-end user data from SMPs is complex and more than often, ineffective. It requires a court order, which is then sent to SMPs requesting Basic Subscriber Information (BSI) such as phone numbers, IP addresses, etc., which will substantially facilitate identifying the accused. The anonymity of users creates a barrier to legal action: a case is only registered under PECA once the perpetrator is identified^{cccl}.

Adding to this predicament, the compliance rates for data sharing vary significantly among platforms. Meta demonstrates a relatively high compliance rate of 75%^{cccli} in Pakistan, attributed to a relationship of trust between the SMP and the FIA^{ccclii}, and the

expertise and well-structured complaints submitted by local investigation officers^{cccliii}. However, in the remaining 25% of cases, Meta declines data requests without specific explanations, often citing the absence of a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) between Pakistan and the United States^{cccliv}. The SMP, X (previously Twitter) has maintained an almost zero-compliance rate for legal data requests from FIA since 2021^{ccclv}. TikTok's approach is limited to content removal upon request from the CCW, rarely providing the backend data necessary for case registration in heinous instances; compliance rate for legal requests for data was 14% last year^{ccclvi}.

These disparities in data sharing adversely impact case registration and investigation timelines. **Complaints involving unknown perpetrators can take 2-3 months to process**, often resulting in no formal case registration due to lack of response on data request from SMPs. In contrast, cases with known perpetrators are generally registered within 1-2 weeks of receiving the complaint^{ccclvii}. Trusted partners (local civil society organizations collaborating with SMPs on online content regulation) identify a *trust deficit* between law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and SMPs as a primary factor undermining the exchange of required user information^{ccclviii}.

Additionally, the mismatch between national context and the global and uniform nature of SMPs' community standards further complicate the matter. For instance, Section 21 of PECA often conflicts with these benchmarks. Meta's policy on sexually explicit content^{ccclix}, defines such content as requiring visible genitals or sexual activity. However, this policy does not address cases where semi-naked photos are shared, which falls under Section 21 of PECA as a cognizable offense. Meta's policy is not nuanced, and fails to take into account the specific Pakistani cultural context, where semi-naked images can pose serious threats to a woman's social or political life^{ccclx}. Moreover, SMPs' policies regarding public figures, which hold them to a higher threshold for harassment claims^{ccclxi}, compounds the issue. This, altogether, results in increasingly restricted data sharing, leading to delays, and staling of legal prosecution of TFVAW-P cases.

Recommendations

To improve the State's response to TFVAW-P, a holistic approach involving interventions at various levels is required^{ccclxii}. The goal is to establish a coherent mechanism that provides legal protection and certainty of justice, addressing the issue of rampant impunity in cases of TFVAW^{ccclxiii}.

Legal Reform: Creating a specific offense of TFVAW

Since women are at a greater risk^{ccclxiv}, in order to separate the issue of TFVAW from the controversies around the PECA being vague and used as a State instrument to crack down on free speech, **it is imperative to amend the law to include a separate section**

on TFVAW which clearly defines the threat to women in the digital realm^{cclxv}. Based on the nature and severity of the offence, within the overall legal framework of TFVAW, subsections may be included to separate non-cognisable and cognisable offences.

Capacity: Ensuring adequate resources, digital interventions and expertise

To ensure access to justice in TFVAW cases, the State must **leverage existing resources and comprehensively implement the recent amendments in PECA** which empower local police stations to verify and register cybercrime related cases^{cclxvi} in cities beyond the operational reach of FIA's CCW. Given the jurisdictional limitations, these cases require transfer to the CCW for investigation following their registration at local police stations. Therefore, **a digital interface^{cclxvii} should be developed to streamline interdepartmental case transfers and provide complainants with a transparent mechanism for tracking case progress.**

To ensure effective investigations, the CCW of FIA **must receive a designated investigation budget^{cclxviii}** drawn up around its workload; the investigation funds should be allocated to officers immediately upon case assignment. Additionally, the State should provide **financial resources to address the human resource constraints** of CCW. Moreover, through amendments in existing rules that complement PECA, mechanisms should be devised for gender sensitive implementation of the law, such as **specialised investigative units in the CCW, preferably led by female investigation officers**, for handling complaints of TFVAW.

Social Media Platforms: Collaborating for safer digital spaces

The persistent issue of restricted data sharing by SMPs in TFVAW cases needs to be addressed through **a collaborative framework between FIA and SMPs that leverages the expertise of Trusted Partners** (civil society organizations that provide local context to improve the monitoring and enforcement capacity of social media platforms)^{cclxix}. By instituting a forum under the oversight of a designated regulator, the initiative should focus on facilitating timely information sharing for TFVAW cases, particularly those involving anonymous accounts, through a vetting process conducted by local Trusted Partners. Such a process would **expedite and legitimise data requests from LEAs regarding heinous cases of TFVAW to SMPs**, potentially improving compliance rates across different platforms by bridging the trust deficit^{cclxx} that currently exists. Additionally, the designated regulator should be mandated to create and regularly update **context-based guidelines informed by stakeholder consultations for SMPs on issues pertaining to TFVAW** to ensure women's online safety and raise public awareness^{cclxxi}.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals a stark reality: massive impunity persists in cases of tech-facilitated violence against women in politics (TFVAW-P) in Pakistan. The State's response, as examined, is woefully inadequate. This shortcoming poses a significant threat to democracy, as it leads to the retreat of women politicians from active participation. With 120 million women in Pakistan^{cclxxii}, their current minimal engagement in politics is already a cause for concern. To secure a truly inclusive democracy, tackling TFVAW-P is paramount.

The State must strengthen its response comprehensively by treating TFVAW-P as a subset of the larger issue of tech-facilitated violence against women (TFVAW)^{cclxxiii}. In this regard, legal reform is critical, capacity building is essential, and collaboration with social media platforms is necessary. The existing law falls short of effectively countering the unique challenges of TFVAW-P. Due to scarcity of resources, investigation and prosecution are unable to deliver properly. Limited data sharing by social media platforms remains a persistent impediment in the identification and prosecution of anonymous perpetrators. Only through concerted efforts can Pakistan hope to create a safer digital space for women politicians. Until then, democracy remains under threat.

UNMASKING ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS: GAPS IN MEASURES TAKEN BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

Prakriti Bhattarai

Abstract

In this policy report, I examine the inadequacy of existing measures adopted by social media platforms in mitigating online violence against women in politics. I conduct a comprehensive review and analysis of existing literature and policies from two major social media platforms META (Facebook, Instagram) and X (former Twitter), to create a timeline of the various interventions that have been implemented since 2000. I then analyse the timeline using a theoretical framework of political economic theory and feminist theory to identify the gaps in the framework. The report identifies technological limitations and the ad-driven revenue model of social media as the causative agents of the gap.

The report is addressed to national governments to ensure compliance of social media companies and recommends policy interventions such as introducing policies that a) Encourage the adoption of proactive technologies and increase investment in AI Moderation Resources, b) Align Economic Incentives with user safety c) Building legal, psychological and other support mechanisms for Women in Politics, d) Ensuring transparency and accountability in moderation practices and e) Building an evidence base to design evidence-based interventions. By outlining these recommendations further analyse the feasibility of the implementation.

Introduction

Social media platforms have become critical spaces for political socialization. Political engagement in social media platforms has provided opportunities for women in their political activism. A study carried out by Women in Parliaments Global Forum shows that 85% of the female parliamentarians surveyed use social media^{cclxxiv}. However, women in politics using online spaces face significant threats and violence. A global survey of 14000 girls in 22 countries found that 98% use social media and a half report being attacked for their opinions before they were old enough to vote. As a result, almost 20% of respondents stopped posting their opinion.^{cclxxv} A 2016 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) study shows that social media have become the number one place in which psychological violence- particularly in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation, and threats -is perpetrated against women parliamentarians.^{cclxxvi} Online violence against women in politics is often considered “the cost” of doing politics.^{cclxxvii}

Online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P) poses a deeper challenge to democracy, serving as a key tool of illiberalism and democratic backsliding^{cclxxviii}. The risks are not limited to concerns about safety but rather undermine the broader democratic processes discouraging female participation in politics.

Digital violence runs hand in hand with impunity. The aggressors are rarely held accountable due to inter alia to the lack of women's human rights approach in the justice system around the world^{cclxxix}. Who is responsible for addressing the issue- government, international agencies, or other stakeholders? Global roundtables organised by NDI with stakeholders reported that the technology platforms have the most to do in terms of implementing interventions to protect women in politics engaging on their platforms.^{cclxxx} Social media companies over the years have implemented various tools and measures to mitigate these risks. These measures however have been proven to be insufficient as they lack comprehensive enforcement and do not consider the specific needs of women in politics.

Methodology

The report comprises a comprehensive analysis of existing reports and literature concerning online violence against women in politics. Moreover, it includes a review of the policies of META and X to identify the interventions implemented by social media platforms since 2000 to mitigate violence against women. The report applies a theoretical framework of the feminist theory and political economy theory to analyse the existing literature.

The primary objective of the report is to address the following research questions:

- a. What measures have social media companies taken to combat violence against women in politics on their platforms? Are the measures effective?
- b. How can governments ensure that social media companies provide a safe online environment for women in politics? What other interventions can governments implement to eradicate online violence against women in politics?

The problem

Violence against women in politics is any act, threat, or physical, sexual, or psychological violence that prevents women from exercising and realising their political rights and a range of human rights^{cclxxxi}. It encompasses all forms of aggression, coercion and intimidation seeking to exclude women from politics- whether serving as civic leaders and activists, voters, political party members, candidates, elected representatives, appointed officials, or election administrators- simply because they are women^{cclxxxii}. The political landscape is increasingly shifting online. Social media platforms today are a space where citizens gather information and voice their opinions. The violence against women in politics that pre-existed in our society in various forms has transcended online.

Online violence against politically active women is one form of the global problem of violence against women in politics (VAWP) which encompasses all forms of aggression, coercion, and intimidation of politically active women simply because they are women^{cclxxxiii}. Research conducted by NDI for mapping the typology and lexicon of violence highlighted that there were six major types of violence observed by women in politics mainly- psychological, physical, and sexual. These violations are carried out through insults and hate speech, embarrassment and reputational damage, physical threats, and sexualised distortion^{cclxxxiv}. Social media companies and their policies have direct control over the content of their platforms and are responsible for content moderation policies, community guidelines, and algorithms. However, reports suggest that the interventions made by social media companies are inconsistent in enforcement which has created a hostile environment for women in politics^{cclxxxv}.

UN Women reports that current policy frameworks both nationally and internationally are insufficient to address the unique characteristics of online violence. The existing laws do not fully encompass the dimensions of these crimes as there is a lack of uniformity across jurisdictions^{cclxxxvi}. The lack of enforcement mechanisms for consistency and transparency of content moderation practices within these companies has limited the protection for women against online abuse^{cclxxxvii}. The problem is further exacerbated due to the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies to manage digital crimes and the lack of system support for women in politics.

The innovations in the content moderation systems and the ability to implement safety features to enhance privacy controls and reporting mechanisms position social media companies as the key stakeholders that can ensure women in politics do not face violence. However, the AI tools used by social media companies for content moderation are often inadequate in identifying and moderating the nuanced nature of gendered abuse online. The measures of social media platforms' reliance on reactive rather than proactive technology measures limit their ability to prevent online violence effectively. The online violence against women in politics creates an environment that causes women to self-censor, be silent, or otherwise withdraw from online political discourse. It's one of the most prevalent forms of violence hindering women's active political engagement but remains largely under-documented and under-researched^{cclxxxviii}

Theoretical framework

Understanding violence against women in politics demands a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates the framework of political economy theory and feminist theory that analyses the cause, impact, and effect of the issue.

Political Economy Theory

Political economy emphasises that economic outcomes are not merely the result of impersonal market forces but are deeply influenced by the distribution of power within society and the political decisions that follow that distribution^{cclxxxix}. Social media platforms are political socialization tools and hold power over politics in the real world. Meta's role in the 2016 US elections^{ccxc}, the suspension of President Donald Trump from Twitter^{ccxcj}, and the global reach and data collection capabilities allow these platforms to wield considerable influence over public policy and regulatory frameworks making the violence against women in politics a political decision.

Similarly, the platforms driven by economic interests seem to resist implementing measures that reduce online abuse. A report by Wall Street Journal published in 2020 revealed that Facebook's algorithms were promoting divisive and extreme content as they drove higher engagement^{ccxcii}. Hence, the insufficient measures are not only the results of a lack of technological advancements and constraints in resources to mitigate violence against women in politics but rather a large political and economic decision of the social media companies.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles, experiences, and interests while also analysing the intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other social categories^{ccxciii}. This critical lens helps us understand online violence against women by situating it in the structures of gender

inequality and the power dynamics of patriarchy. Online violence does not happen in isolation but is rather a form of deeply rooted historical and systemic discrimination and subordination. Women in public roles challenge the dogmatic position of women in a patriarchal society. Hence, from a feminist theory point of argument, it can be established that violence against women in politics is a means of reinforcing the patriarchal norms using violence and threats to discourage them from political engagement.

The concept of intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw further adds to the feminist theory by focusing on how different forms of discrimination intersect creating unique experiences of violence for women from marginalised groups. Amnesty International found that Black women politicians are 84% more likely to be mentioned in abusive and problematic tweets compared to white women politicians^{ccxciv}. This intersectional approach underscores that online violence is not only gendered but also radicalised. This emphasises the need for policy intervention that addresses the unique vulnerabilities of women across regions, race, and class.

Historical Timeline of the measures and analysis of the current measures

In order to identify and understand current gaps in measures, in the table below I present ahistorical timeline of interventions that social media companies have implemented to mitigate violence in social media relevant to violence against women in politics.

| Year | Interventions |
|------|--|
| 2009 | Facebook introduced the first version of its user reporting tools allowing users to flag inappropriate content |
| 2013 | Twitter updates its abuse reporting system to allow users to report specific abusive tweets rather than just entire accounts ^{ccxcv} |
| 2015 | Facebook launched Safety Check a feature that allows users to notify during times of crisis which later was expanded and was used as a response to threats of violence ^{ccxcvi} |
| 2016 | Twitter introduced a mute function and notifications filtering to help manage abusive content effectively ^{ccxcvii} |

| | |
|------|---|
| 2017 | Twitter formed the Twitter Safety Council bringing together global experts and organizations to advise on safety products and policies ^{cccxcviii} |
| 2018 | Facebook began implementing AI-driven tools to detect and remove abusive content automatically including gender-based harassment ^{ccxcix} |
| 2019 | Instagram introduced the 'Restrict' feature allowing users to shadow-ban abusive commenters without alerting them, to reduce harassment ^{ccc} |
| 2020 | X introduced 'Conversation Control' allowing users to limit who can reply to other tweets, helping to reduce the impact of harassment ^{ccci} |
| 2020 | Facebook launched the Women's Safety Hub providing tools specifically targeted at protecting women from online violence and harassment ^{cccii} |
| 2021 | X introduced Safety Mode an auto-blocking feature that temporarily blocks accounts engaging in abusive or harmful behaviour ^{ccciii} |
| 2022 | Facebook updated its community standards to include stronger prohibitions against coordinated harassment and threats, with specific protections for women and public figures ^{ccciv} |

The measures taken above underscore gaps that are rooted on technological limitations of the existing measures and the economics behind the gap.

Technological limitations and their nature

Social media companies have come a long way from basic community guidelines to the use of AI in content moderation. However, these measures are proving to become insignificant alongside the scale of problems women in politics are facing. Social media is growing to become a crucial political space but is highly unregulated. Reports from Amnesty International^{cccv} and the Center for Countering Digital Hate^{cccvii} underscore that abusive content is often not removed promptly and, in many cases, not removed at all. This inconsistency is the result of the limitations of automated moderation systems that struggle to identify abusive content that is often unidentified in nuanced and context-specific language^{cccvi}. The historical timeline above shows that the innovation/policies around this has always been reactive rather than proactive. Many

of these policies, especially those concerning harassment, showcase the failures of one-size fits all policymaking ^{cccviii}.

Similarly, there is a lack of transparency in how social media companies are enforcing their policies. The lack of transparency makes it challenging to evaluate how effective the current measures are and to hold companies responsible for any shortcomings in enforcing their policies. The transparency reports published by social media companies are often data that lack detailed information as to how social media companies are addressing the issue.

Economics of the gap

The gaps in policies of social media companies to mitigate online violence are not merely technological limitations. Economic motivations contribute to the gaps. Social media companies operate on an ad-driven revenue model. In an ad-driven revenue model user engagement is the primary metric that ensures the profitability of the company. Controversial content, including abusive and inflammatory posts often generate high levels of engagement, creating a perverse incentive for these companies to be lenient in their enforcement of content moderation policies ^{cccix}. In 2023, social media advertising revenue worldwide was estimated to be over \$226 billion in Facebook, Instagram, and X. The algorithms are designed to drive content visibility enhancing user engagement. However, research has shown that this algorithmic prioritization can increase harmful content, including misinformation and hate speech^{cccix}. Platforms are hesitant to take action against accounts that generate traffic and interactions. This hesitation is often more pronounced in cases involving influential or politically connected individuals, where the economic and political costs of moderation might outweigh the benefits. The leniency is therefore catastrophic for women in politics as the form of violence they face in social media is often perpetuated by sexism and hate. It is urgent to act on innovative policy solutions as the abuse has not only harmed and targeted individuals but has been discouraging women from participating in politics.

X's updated abuse reporting system, mute function and conversation controls, and Meta's implementation of AI-driven content detection, only come into play only after an incident of abuse has occurred. These tools often rely heavily on users reporting harmful content, which places the burden on the victims to police their own safety online^{cccxi}. The measures taken are reactive rather than proactive and the damage caused by abuse and violence to women in politics is irreversible making the current tools and policies inadequate and insufficient to effectively prevent such harm and protect the victims. The AI tools currently used by platforms are inadequate in detecting nuanced forms of abuse often context-specific and in various languages. Amnesty International 2023, reports that existing AI technologies struggle to understand the complex nature of gendered abuse, suggesting a need for improved human oversight

and more sophisticated algorithms. The lack of moderation capabilities is reflected in the reactive policies underscoring the importance of a proactive approach. Research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) in 2022 revealed that social media platforms failed to respond to 90% of the abusive content reported against high-profile women in politics, underscoring a critical deficiency in current moderation capabilities^{cccxi}.

Policy recommendations

The policy recommendations outlined below are directed to governments in order to ensure that social media companies make user safety a prime concern.

Introduce policies that encourage the adoption of proactive technologies and increase investment in AI Moderation Resources

Social media companies have been reactive in introducing measures to mitigate online violence. The historical account of the measures presented in Table 1 shows that social media companies have been using both Human and AI Moderation Policies. Rather than relying on reactive measures, governments should introduce policies that encourage the adoption of proactive measures like Perspective API developed by Jigsaw. Jigsaw is a technology incubator and subsidiary of Alphabet Inc. that develops solutions to address online safety and digital threats. Jigsaw believes that online abuse and harassment silences important voices in conversation, forcing already marginalised people offline^{cccxi}. The incubator has successfully designed an advanced tool called Perspective API. Perspective is a free API that uses machine learning to identify toxic comments making it easier to host better conversations online^{cccxi}. The algorithm analyses online comments and conversations. Comments and conversations will be flagged as harmful by scoring their toxicity in the toxicity meter built into the algorithm. Perspective API provides real-time assessments and can enable platforms to filter out harmful comments. Currently, The New York Times, Open Web, South East Missourian, Coral, and many more have already implemented Perspective API to mitigate online harassment. Implementing policies that ensure and encourage that such technologies be strategically used can rather prevent violence against women in politics which addresses the root cause and prevents violence from happening.

Meanwhile, it is of crucial importance to acknowledge that technology is continually advancing and undergoing transformation. Research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) in 2022 revealed that social media platforms failed to respond to 90% of the abusive content reported against high-profile women in politics, underscoring a critical deficiency in current moderation capabilities^{cccxi}. Additionally, a 2023 report by Amnesty International highlights that existing AI tools are often insufficient in recognising the nuanced nature of gendered abuse, pointing to the need for enhanced human oversight to address these gaps effectively^{cccxi}. These data suggest

that increased investment in technologies for content moderation is required alongside investment in human resources. The government should introduce policies that ensure that social media companies allocate resources toward developing such technologies and training human resources. This approach not only leverages technology but also ensures that violence against women in politics can be addressed by using proactive measures and avoiding such cases of violence from happening.

Align economic incentives with user safety

Research published in *New Media & Society* ^{cccxvii} demonstrates that social media platforms frequently deprioritise the removal of abusive content because controversial posts tend to generate higher user engagement, which is closely tied to advertising revenue. Similarly, an FTC staff report revealed that major social media companies including Meta and Facebook prioritised user engagement over safety ^{cccxviii}. The key performance indicator of social media platforms is user engagement. Governments should introduce policies that encourage social media platforms to use user safety as a key performance indicator. Introducing regulations that impose fines and other penalties on platforms that fail to protect users from online abuse can be an effective policy intervention. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulation enacted by the European Union has been an effective policy to ensure children's privacy protection. In 2022, the Irish Data Protection Commission (DPC) fined Meta €405 million for violating GDPR's children's privacy protections on Instagram, specifically for allowing minors to set up business accounts that exposed their contact information^{cccix}. This sets up a precedent that such regulations can be enacted in cases of online violence against women. The policy should be followed up by providing economic incentives, rewards, and recognition to platforms that adopt user safety metrics as key performance indicators alongside engagement metrics. The recommendation to align the economic incentives with user safety addresses the cause of the problem of why platforms deprioritise content moderation. Introducing interventions that penalise non-compliance and encourage platforms that leverage user safety as a key performance indicator can be an effective way of addressing the problem.

Building Support Mechanisms for Women in Politics

A 2023 study by the International Center for Research on Women^{cccxx} concludes that women in politics often lack access to adequate support when facing online harassment, exacerbating the impact of abuse on their well-being and careers. Reports by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) consistently show that bureaucratic obstacles discourage women politicians from seeking help^{cccxxi}. Governments can recognise that violence against women in politics is an emerging issue and take systemic approaches to build support mechanisms. The robust support systems for women in politics facing online threats include measures like hotlines and legal advisory services. Governments can create partnerships with civil society and women's rights groups to provide immediate and specialised services recognising that every case of such violence is

unique and requires specialised treatments. . The establishment of such legislative support mechanisms ensures that women feel supported by the state addressing the psychological, legal, and technical needs of the victim. In a broader view, this will create a positive message encouraging women to participate in politics as the state recognises that the political landscape is unequal and women need support to essentially make democracy more participatory.

Transparency and Accountability in Moderation Practices

Social media companies have been publishing reports on their moderation processes. However, the data on the reports of abuse addressed has been quite unclear. The lack of accountability in modern practices is a pressing issue. A 2023 study by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) supports this assertion, noting persistent gaps in moderation effectiveness ^{cccxxii}. Amnesty International ^{cccxxiii} further recommends that platforms publish regular transparency reports detailing the types of content reported, actions taken, and response times. In order to address the lack of transparency and accountability in the moderation practices, governments can introduce policies that ensure that the reports include metrics on the number of reports, types of abuse, response times, and outcomes. Governments can advocate in partnership with international organizations to make moderation data publicly available so that researchers and academicians can further the agenda by researching on means and media to mitigate violence against women in politics.

Promote International Cooperation for the Regulation of Social Media Companies

The European Parliament's 2023 report emphasises the importance of global cooperation to effectively regulate platforms that operate across borders^{cccxxiv}. The United Nations has also called for increased international collaboration to address online gender-based violence, recognising that individual country regulations are often insufficient to address the global scale of the problem ^{cccxxv}. However, international cooperation still looms as a pressing problem in the regulation of social media companies. Governments should work on creating conventions and agreements with the support of regional and international agencies to ensure that social media companies comply with a set of standards to ensure that the moderation policies are implied and the cases of violence against women in politics do not go unaddressed in their platforms. The absence of standardised definitions and methods for documenting violence against women in politics, particularly online, hampers efforts to collect data systematically and compare it across contexts^{cccxxvi}. International cooperation will assist in defining the problem, creating databases, and implementing efforts that

Building an evidence base

Online violence against women in politics remains largely unrecorded with many incidents not being reported or documented due to fear of reprisal, lack of support or

normalization of abuse^{ccccxxvii}. Evidence gathering and research is a crucial early step in designing intervention. It helps document women's experiences, determines the magnitude of violence, victims, perpetrators, and locations as well as indicates what context poses a greater risk to women^{ccccxxviii}. Tackling violence against women in politics and building effective policies and interventions will require datasets that assist in crafting evidence-based policies. Governments should start creating a repository of databases for online violence against women in politics. This dataset will not only help create unique policies that cater to context-specific policies but will also assist researchers and academicians to further their research in investigating means and methods to tackle violence against women in politics.

Analysis of the recommendations

The implementation of the listed recommendation faces several challenges due to factors such as technological limitations, economic interests, governance and legal complexities, power imbalances, and the lack of united international cooperation.

While proactive technologies like Jigsaw's Perspective API offer promise, they struggle with nuances in gendered abuse and require substantial financial investment, which can be prohibitive for smaller platforms. Aligning economic incentives with user safety is hindered by the tendency of social media companies to prioritise engagement metrics that drive revenue, with fines often viewed as manageable costs rather than deterrents^{ccccxxix}. Building effective support mechanisms for women in politics is obstructed by bureaucratic inefficiencies and funding constraints, as noted by the ICRW^{ccccxxx} and IPU^{ccccxxxi}. Transparency in moderation practices is limited by vague reporting, requiring standardised metrics and clear guidelines to enhance accountability^{ccccxxxi}.

Amongst many examples of attempts to govern social media platforms, GDPR has been so considered a significant step taken by the EU. The introduction of GDPR has increased the accountability of companies and provided a clear framework for data protection compliance, leading to better practices across the board^{ccccxxxi}. Despite the substantial fines imposed under GDPR, many social media companies continue to view these penalties as legal burden or boundary to test, not an opportunity to evolve^{ccccxxxi}. The fines are perceived as manageable costs and with social media companies' growth as a place of politics and the platform power they hold over politics across the world, they have been notable lobbying for regulations that is good for the business of the company. However, governments cannot be deterred by this as the scope of the impact has reached beyond individual political reputation damage. Social media platforms are a place of political socialization. Without standardised definitions, documentation methods, and centralised efforts from governments online violence against women will go unreported with impacts that will normalise the abuse. Civil society organizations, businesses, the general public, and women's rights groups'

synchronised efforts with intentionality that the effect of the violence is beyond the speculated scope is crucial in tackling online violence against women in politics.

Conclusion

Online violence against women in politics threatens both individual safety and the foundations of inclusive principles of democracy. Through a comprehensive analysis of the policies of social media companies, I have created a timeline of the interventions taken by social media companies to address the issue. The analysis of the timeline has identified significant gaps in the current interventions and has highlighted the necessity of more effective measures. Additionally, I have listed and analysed policy recommendations that focus on establishing robust proactive measures and evidence-gathering mechanisms alongside the creation of systems that protect and support women in politics from violence. By taking these steps, we can foster an inclusive political landscape where women can partake in politics.

CONCLUSION

Hannah Phillips and Rosario Grimà Algora

What is clear from these reports is that violence against women in politics is complex and constitutes a threat to our democracies. These research reports focussed on various aspects and locations of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics – from perpetrators in sub-Saharan Africa to legislators in the USA – yet common challenges and recommendations emerge.

A major challenge is the lack of political willingness to acknowledge this as a form of violence or as a policy issue at all. When policies are in place, inadequate resourcing and implementation prevents justice. Governments have not comprehensively grappled with the power of social media companies and have been slow to regulate and prosecute online harms. Quite often, online violence against women in politics exceeds national borders and requires collaboration with other states. Policy solutions to violence against women in politics, thus, need to be holistic, and include leveraging existing mechanisms, adopting new measures, and engaging with all relevant actors.

Each report ends with specific recommendations, many of which chime with what we urged in our first report.^{cccxv} We synthesised and identified 20 common recommendations across the policy cycle: from policy advocacy, policy making and policy implementation. Some recommendations cut across these themes. There are recommendations for specific bodies including national governments and social media companies. Other actions must be taken collaboratively or by multiple bodies in order to make real change.

Multiple actors – including national governments, political parties, civil society organisations and the international community – have an opportunity to support women and improve our political institutions. As part of a growing research and advocacy community, we are committed to continue to advance understandings and develop evidence-based support to reduce the violent threats aimed at politically active women, including the School's alumni, in order to improve democracy for all.

Common Recommendations to Strengthen Democracy by Reducing Threats to Women in Politics

| Responsible Body/ies | Recommendation | Policy Cycle |
|----------------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Politicians and Civil Society | Build a broad coalition of support across ideologies and sectors: present violence against women in politics not just as a gender-specific problem but as a broader issue of public safety, violence deterrence, and democracy. | Policy advocacy |
| Men, especially male politicians | Champion the issue of violence against women in politics as matter that should be prioritised for the sake of democracy. | Policy advocacy |
| Civil Society | Integrate violence against women in politics into advocacy agenda e.g. feminist movement, digital regulation and political participation | Policy advocacy |
| (Traditional) Media | Prioritise raising awareness of the problem of violence against women in politics and the solutions. Frame the issue as important for protecting democracy. | Policy advocacy |
| International Community | Collaborate and cooperate in the regulation of social media companies. | Policy advocacy |
| National Government | Prioritise the gender equality portfolio in the senior levels of government. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Create specific offences for violence against women, including technology-facilitated violence. Legislative efforts could be within protections for all politicians and/or integrated within public safety or violence legislation and/or in hate crime legislation and/or in online regulation. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Strengthen online regulation: encourage the adoption of proactive technologies and safety as key performance indicator. Penalise non-compliance. Create a well-resourced, powerful regulator for social media companies, ensuring a focus on gender and public life. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Engage with and leverage the expertise of civil society and others who work to address violence against women in politics to create policy and support mechanisms. | Policy making |

| Responsible Body/ies | Recommendation | Policy Cycle |
|--|---|-----------------------|
| National Governments | Establish and implement policies that ensure equitable access to political finance, such as public funding allocations for women candidates and measures against economic violence. | Policy making |
| National Government, International Community, Civil Society, Research Community | Establish, implement and evaluate measures to challenge and change harmful gender norms e.g. community sensitisation programs for religious and opinion leaders, educational institutions, and the general public. | Policy making |
| National Governments, International Community, Civil Society, Research Community | Close the research gaps on violence against women in politics, especially in terms of understanding perpetrators, specific manifestations and the impacts on politically active women and their communities. Report on the prevalence and impact of violence against women in politics, and the effectiveness of policy measures. | Policy making |
| Social Media Companies | Engage with national governments, politicians and third sector/civil society to develop context-specific guidelines for content moderation. | Policy making |
| National Governments | Improve coordination between bodies responsible for different aspects of violence against women in politics (e.g. online regular, prosecutors, different police departments) | Policy implementation |
| National Governments | Leverage existing laws and resources to address violence against women in politics e.g. ensuring proper resourcing for implementation and training on how existing legislation should be applied to political contexts. | Policy implementation |
| National Governments | Properly resource law enforcement abilities to address violence against women in politics with a dedicated budget and with experts e.g. trained female police officers and clear support services. | Policy implementation |

| Responsible Body/ies | Recommendation | Policy Cycle |
|--|--|--------------------------------|
| National Governments (Parliaments) | Establish independent bodies to investigate allegations of violence against women in politics. | Policy making & implementation |
| Political Parties | Establish and enforce clear protocols that explicitly prohibit violence against women in politics. Establish policies that ensure equitable access to political finance to women. | Policy making & implementation |
| Social Media Companies | Publish regular transparency reports detailing the types of content reported, actions taken, and response times. | Policy making & implementation |
| National Governments, International Community, Civil Society, Research Community | Collect gender-disaggregated data for policy monitoring and evaluation for online regulation (and other relevant policies) | Policy making, & evaluation |

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Conclusion

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