



This submission is presented on behalf of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).ⁱ NDI's work focuses on creating resilient democratic systems with the capacity to manage diverse and complex social, economic and political demands effectively. Democratic resilience requires that systems and processes take account of all populations, including women.

Violence Against Women in Politics

1. NDI's brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women focuses specifically on communicating the Institute's assessment of the issue of **violence against women in politics** as a key barrier to women's political participation.ⁱⁱ It comprises a range of harms including harassment, threats, coercion and psychological abuse (all increasingly online), as well as sexual and physical assault. This violence impacts all classes and groups of women who decide to become politically active, including community activists and advocates, voters, and elected and appointed officials at all levels. It is experienced in private and public spaces, and in what we have termed 'protected public spaces,' such as political parties and parliaments. NDI views the violence that politically active women face as an abuse of human rights, an infringement of the civil and political rights of women, and - through its ability to discourage women from participating in the public decision-making process that affects their lives - as fundamentally undermining the quality and integrity of democratic practices and governance.

2. NDI has found that assessing the nature and degree of intimidation experienced by women in politics around the world faces an immediate challenge: years of systematic silence on and denial of the issue, particularly if it has not involved actual bodily harm. Too often, politically-active women who experience abuse, harassment and even assault have been dismissed and told that these acts are merely "the cost of doing politics." But in fact, violence *costs* the benefits of the sustainable and democratic governance that an inclusive political space can create. NDI operates in about 50 countries across the globe, but has no programs in Canada. However, it is notable that in keeping with the global trend, politically-active women in Canada have increasingly spoken out about the violence they have faced. Surveys like the one produced by the Canadian Press,ⁱⁱⁱ sit alongside testimonies from women like Michelle Rempel MP,^{iv} and the published reports of vile abuse faced by Premier Rachel Notley,^v and many others. The chilling effect that this violence towards high-profile women has on the ambitions of young women and new entrants to politics is of particular concern.^{vi}

3. Although violence in politics can be experienced by anyone, regardless of their gender, traditional definitions of 'political violence' have not captured the additional acts and threats perpetrated against politically-active women because of their gender. NDI's analysis is that violence against women in politics has three distinct characteristics: it targets women *because of* their gender; can be gendered in its very *form* (as exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence); and its impact is to discourage *women in particular* from being or becoming politically active. Further, the Institute's experience in supporting women's ambition to be politically active indicates that even violence that is not motivated by gender can still have a disproportionately high impact on women, due to their unequal status in society and their increased vulnerability.

The Role of Political Parties

4. NDI views political parties as a cornerstone of democracy, providing critical pathways for citizens' political participation and engagement. However, because of history, tradition and gender

norms, political parties tend to be ‘protected’ public spaces, allowing and enabling violence against women within their ranks to take place.^{vii} NDI’s research indicates that parties have a number of ways in which they can address the inequality that allow women’s vulnerability to be exploited.^{viii} Steps to be taken might include: strengthening of internal dispute resolution mechanisms with enforced sanctions for perpetrators; developing mechanisms for greater transparency about the allocation of resources to candidates; a review of party meeting times and locations; consistent monitoring of party social media accounts for abusive or hate speech; and attention being paid to the privacy and security of members’ databases.

Digital and Social Media

5. NDI’s experience of the impact of digital and social media on women’s ability to participate in politics with safety and security is that this is an area where an old problem has been given new and more toxic life. The anti-democratic impact of psychological abuse and other forms of violence through digital technology and digital media outlets, including social media can all significantly change the nature, scale and effect of the intimidation of women in politics. Online attacks against politically-active women allow for harassment to be anonymized and can develop a mob dynamic—sometimes transnationally. In this way, online abuse, intimidation and harassment leads to women’s self-censorship and withdrawal from public discourse and correspondence,^{ix} and represents a direct barrier to *women’s* free speech, undermining democracy in all its key elements.

Opportunities for Action

6. NDI has begun to collect examples of “Opportunities for Action” to stop violence against women in politics. As the different forms of violence are often overlapping in nature and have different dynamics in terms of political context and institutional setting, single strategies are likely to have only a partial impact. Instead, multidimensional approaches applied and monitored over time, appear to be necessary to address and reverse ongoing resistance to women’s equal political inclusion.

NDI’s #NotTheCost Campaign

7. In 2016, NDI launched the #NotTheCost campaign - a global call to action to raise awareness, collect data and develop solutions to stop violence against women in politics.^x This year for the first time, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (SRVAW), Dr. Dubravka Šimonović, will deliver a thematic report on the issue of violence against women in politics to the United Nations General Assembly in October, 2018. This is a direct response to the call made by NDI’s Chair, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, for the UN to monitor and report on this violence at the global level.

Conclusion

8. From the viewpoint of its international expertise, NDI is pleased to be able to contribute its understanding of violence against politically-active women as a significant barrier to women’s political participation. We look forward to receiving the Committee’s final report, and exploring the application of any solutions that are developed to our work in support of strengthening democratic practice and resilience around the world.

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs
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- ⁱ National Democratic Institute. 2018, "Homepage." <https://www.ndi.org/>.
- ⁱⁱ National Democratic Institute. 2016, "Call to Action." <https://contribute.ndi.org/sites/default/files/not-the-cost-action-plan.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Smith, Joanna. (2018), "Canada's female MPs speak out on sexual misconduct: the best friend of violence is silence." *The Canadian Press*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/3941933/sexual-misconduct-canadian-politics/>.
- ^{iv} Spurr, Ben. (2016), "MP Michele Rempel paints picture of routine sexism in Parliament." *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/04/19/trudeau-taking-tory-mp-complaints-about-sexism-in-parliament-seriously.html>.
- ^v National Post. (2016), "Wildrose leader Brian Jean apologizes for joking about beating Alberta Premier Rachel Notley." <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/wildrose-leader-brian-jean-apologizes-for-joking-about-beating-alberta-premier-during-public-forum>.
- ^{vi} Shepherd, Tory. (2014), "More Women Turning Off Politics after Julia Gillard Was Badly Treated." *The Advertiser*. <https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/more-women-turning-off-politics-after-julia-gillard-was-badly-treated/news-story/321177664cf100e0316704bad5c5f8a6>.
- ^{vii} National Democratic Institute. 2016, "Call to Action." <https://contribute.ndi.org/sites/default/files/not-the-cost-action-plan.pdf>. (Page 9).
- ^{viii} National Democratic Institute. (2018), "No Party to Violence: Analyzing Violence Against Women in Political Parties." https://ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_No_Party_to_Violence_ReportFinal.pdf.
- ^{ix} NDI is currently implementing a program that undertakes case study data analysis of political discourse on Twitter among student populations in order to understand whether and when young women disengage from political discourse as a result of experiencing online violence. Report on this study is forthcoming.
- ^x National Democratic Institute. 2018, "Not-The-Cost." <https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>.