

... EVIDENCE PAPER

Review of the Committee on Standards in Public Life into the Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates



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DEMOCRACY

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

... Written By

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On 24 July 2017, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, at the request of the United Kingdom’s Prime Minister, called for a “Review into the Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates and the Broader Implications for Other Candidates and Public Office Holders.” The Committee was particularly interested in whether and how these experiences have altered the relationship and interaction between candidates and the public; the potential wider effects of such intimidation on public life; the role of political parties; the enforceability of the current law; and what steps might be taken to prevent intimidation in future.

In 2016, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched the #NotTheCost campaign, a global call to action to stop violence against women in politics. Its title reflects the fact that many women are told that harassment, threats, psychological abuse, physical and sexual assault are “the cost of doing politics.” This program was designed to bring together the stakeholders, networks and advocates involved in currently regionally segmented discussions about the problem. For the last two years, NDI has been working to challenge this claim by raising awareness, collecting information and building capacity among our partners in order to eradicate this phenomenon. On 8 September 2017, NDI submitted its’ piece of evidence to the enquiry addressing the problem of violence against women in politics specifically and provided solutions to address the problem in support of its campaign.

On 13 December 2017, the Committee on Standards in Public Life released its’ review to the Prime Minister, which included parts of NDI’s evidence. Below you will find NDI’s full submission that was given to the Committee.

1. This submission is presented on behalf of the **National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)**. NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that supports the development of democracy and governance globally, including promoting and strengthening inclusive political processes, state-civil society engagement, open and responsive governance institutions, and commitment to international frameworks. 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.

2. NDI is a leading organization in the field of advancing women's political participation around the world, empowering them to participate, compete and lead as equal and active partners in democratic change. Mobilizing its global networks and drawing on three decades of experience in 132 countries, NDI supports women's aspirations for gender equality, and for inclusive and responsive government. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies.

Violence Against Women in Politics

3. NDI's evidence paper for the Committee on Standards in Public Life's review of the intimidation of parliamentary candidates, focuses specifically on communicating the Institute's assessment of the issue of **violence against women in politics**. The Institute has an international mandate, and while we focus our work in transitional and consolidating democracies, we understand from the women that we engage with - including British parliamentarians - that the lessons we have learned about the issue of violence against women in politics have universal resonance.

4. The scope of the Institute's engagement with this issue is broader than parliamentary women, it encompasses community activists and advocates, voters, elected and appointed officials at all levels. NDI views the violence that politically active women face as an abuse of human rights, and infringement on the civil and political rights of women, and - through its ability to discourage women from participating in the public decision making that affects their lives - as fundamentally undermining the quality and integrity of democratic practices and governance.

5. NDI has found that assessing the nature and degree of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates around the world faces an immediate challenge - years of systematic silence on and denial of the issue. Acknowledgment of the problem of violence against women in politics has been hampered by three things: first, the conventional wisdom that, unless there is a physical manifestation, it is not violence; the perception that there are no specific gender dimensions to violence in politics; and the fact that the vast majority of women who have experienced attacks are likely to remain silent about them. All three have contributed to the hidden nature of the problem. Victims may not even recognize what has happened to them as a form of violence, or may deny the problem altogether in an effort to deflect charges that they are "hysterical" or "not coping" with the demands of the job. Many are afraid of being viewed as victims or accused of "playing the victim" for fear of justifying claims that women do not belong in political life.

The Problem

6. Violence against women in politics is one of the most serious barriers facing politically active women. Our understanding of the issue of violence against women in politics is that its various manifestations are experienced by and impact on the vast majority of women who are active in politics. Historically, this violence has been a largely hidden phenomenon. Too often, 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. A growing number of reports from around the world indicate that as women step forward to claim their right to participate in politics, they are met by a backlash in terms of violence that encompasses a range of harms including persistent harassment and discrimination, psychological abuse - in person and increasingly online - and physical or sexual assault.

7. Therefore, NDI’s answer to the question of **whether the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates reflects a wider change in the relationship and discourse between public office holders and the public**, is to say that in relation to women it does not. Evidence suggests that the intensity and universality of the issue as it affects women candidates has both heightened with the increasing number of women in politics, and while still under-recorded it is no longer an invisible issue. The way in which the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates could reflect a wider change in the relationship and discourse between women public office holders and the public, is if in response to the intimidation that they face, women withdraw from politics or self-censor the terms of their engagement in political discourse

8. Violence against women is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which cuts across social classes, ages and regions and is experienced in private and public spaces. The definition of violence against women in politics fits within existing frameworks and standards defending human rights and defining gender-based harms developed by the United Nations, regional organizations and national jurisdictions. Specifically, it is defined as various forms of psychological, physical and sexual violence, intimidation and coercion that specifically target women as women, either pressuring them to leave politics or to resign as candidates or political officials, to withdraw from their membership in political parties or other political institutions, or to otherwise remain silent on the political issues they care about.¹

9. 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. Gender norms shape *how* and *why* women are subject to violence in politics, as well as what types of acts are used against them. This kind of violence is not a new phenomenon but has for decades gone unreported and unrecorded. In Bolivia, for example, which ranks second in the world for levels of women in its parliament,² “harassment and violence against women involved in politics” have been identified

¹ Bardall, “Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender and Electoral Violence,” 2011.

² Dr. Mona Lena Krook is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University.

as “the main barrier against women’s political participation,”³ and led to the introduction of legislation to criminalise such violence.

10. 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 subordinate status in society and their increased vulnerability. Additionally, when compared to the experience of men in politics, women are more likely to experience familial or social intimidation in the private sphere, and/or violence from within their own political party - which we have described as ‘protected public spaces.’

11. Acts of violence against women in politics — whether directed at women as voters, civic leaders, political party members, candidates, elected representatives or appointed officials — have an intent beyond their specific target: to frighten women who are already politically active, to deter women who might consider engaging in politics, and to communicate to society that women should not participate in public life in any capacity. Therefore, the *motive* behind the violence is as important as the intended target. Therefore, in answer to the Committee’s question **whether the experience of intimidation by Parliamentary candidates could discourage people from standing for elected or appointed public offices**, we would say that evidence suggests in unambiguous terms that women in politics around the world have experienced such violence and that their experiences have implications for their ability and willingness to participate actively in public life. The chilling effect that violence has on the ambitions of young women and new entrants to politics is of particular concern.

12. **With regard to whether the media or social media has significantly changed the nature, scale, or effect of intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, our experience is that this is an area where an old problem has been given new and more toxic life.** Violence against women in politics extends beyond bodily harm. In some cases, perpetrators of this violence may focus on women’s bodies or traditional social roles to deny or undercut their suitability or competence in the political sphere. Because motive is a defining element, using gendered imagery or stereotypes to attack female opponents is in some regions of the world included within the scope of violence against women in politics, as the message communicated through these tropes is that women do not belong in the political realm.

13. 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, including Parliamentary candidates. Attacks against politically-active women are often channeled online,⁴ where harassment can be anonymized, developed by a mob dynamic—sometimes

³ IPU, [Women in National Parliaments](#).

⁴ Inter Parliamentary Union. 2016, “Issues Brief: Sexism, Harassment, and Violence against Women Parliamentarians.” <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>.

transnationally—while undermining a woman’s sense of personal security in ways not experienced by men.⁵ In this way, online abuse, intimidation and harassment leads to women’s self-censorship and withdrawal from public discourse and correspondence, and represents a direct barrier to *women’s* free speech, undermining democracy in all its key elements: participation (down), representation (constrained), transparency (circumvented) and accountability (denied, some would say refused).

14. **The Committee asks what role political parties should play in preventing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates and encouraging constructive debate.** NDI is currently examining the violence that women party members face within their organizations.⁶ NDI views political parties as a cornerstone of democracy, providing critical pathways for citizens’ political participation and engagement. They are instrumental in mobilising citizens behind ideologies and policies, select candidates for representative posts, lead electoral campaigns, form legislative blocs in parliaments and, if elected, implement a program of government. Their role in defining key political institutions - policy formation, elections and parliaments - mean they are an important gateway through which women can enter and participate in the political process. 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.

15. At the same time, experiences that both men and women candidates have that are often dismissed as “the cost of doing politics,” have different dynamics according to gender, present new opportunities for micro and macro aggressions, and further damage democratic practice and culture. For example, the exchange of material goods for positions of power within parties or elected bodies is often commonly accepted, even though it is corrupt behavior. However, for women, unlike the vast majority of men, the predominant currency of these demands is sex or sexual favors, a practice labelled ‘sextortion’ which clearly falls into the category of violence against women. Importantly, this type of extortion further pollutes a system’s democratic culture: women learn that only by providing such “favors” can they move up the political ladder, and citizens’ perceptions of women in politics are colored by the belief that any woman who advances must have performed such favors.

16. With this understanding, NDI is piloting new methodologies to explore the causes, nature and impact of violence against women within political parties, and identify strategies to address it. The first pilot country report from Honduras, was launched in Tegucigalpa on 8th September 2017.⁷ Parties have a number of ways in which they can address the inequality that allow women’s vulnerability to be exploited. Steps to be taken might include: the introduction of internal codes of ethics with zero-tolerance for sexual violence; 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

⁵ Pew Research Center. 2014, “Online Harassment.” <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>.

⁶ National Democratic Institute. 2017, “Reflect, Reform Re-engage: A Blueprint for 21st Century Parties.” <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Final%20RRR%20Blueprint%20%281%29.pdf>.

⁷ National Democratic Institute. 2017, “Violencia contra las mujeres en la política: Investigación en partidos políticos de Honduras.” <https://www.ndi.org/node/24741>.

times and locations; ensuring that candidate selection events and processes are conducted on the basis of policy debate not gender issues; consistent monitoring of party social media accounts for abusive or hate speech; attention being paid to the privacy and security of members' databases.

Opportunities for Action

17. With respect to the Committee's enquiry **about other measures which might be effective in addressing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, and candidates for public offices more broadly**, NDI has begun to collect examples of "Opportunities for Action" to stop violence against women in politics. These opportunities for action are generally targeted at specific institutions or sectors of society, and may be used singly, joined in varying combinations or modified to fit each particular political situation, institution or context. A varied host of different actors can and should be engaged in pursuing actions to stop violence against women in politics. As the different forms of violence are often overlapping in nature, 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. Some actions can and should be taken by the full range of political actors - individuals, organizations, institutions - and at all levels. These include:

- Develop and disseminate the concept of "violence against women in politics" to give a name to these acts and raise awareness at the global, national and local levels. Emphasize that these behaviors should not be "the cost of doing politics," but that they actively seek to prevent women's political participation as women. This constitutes a serious violation of international norms and national laws regarding democracy, human rights and gender equality.
- Raise awareness of the global nature of these debates to emphasize that violence against women in politics is not a phenomenon restricted to one area of the world. Although specific acts of violence may take different forms across countries and world regions, they are the same in terms of their intentions to restrict and control women's political participation.
- Develop indicators and collect data on the prevalence, form and impact of violence against women in politics. The lack of data contributes to the denial of this problem, but statistics and qualitative case studies can support efforts to combat this phenomenon—as well as illustrate its broader meanings for women, politics and society. One approach would be to incorporate data on political violence within existing international studies and databases of violence against women. Those working at a regional, national or local level may add indicators on the issue to existing regional indicators or surveys. Measured over time, these data will permit evaluation of strategies to see where progress has been made and what further interventions may be needed.
- Support networking among female politicians and civil society organizations interested in tackling this issue, whether on a formal or informal basis, by providing opportunities to connect during organizational or regional gatherings—or to connect virtually through organization platforms. Regardless of the platform or forum, care should be taken to ensure that the women participating are protected from any backlash or breach of confidentiality.
- Provide training programs for women on how to respond to and mitigate acts of violence against women in politics, including how to decrease vulnerability and respond

effectively to both in-person and online attacks. Provide training for men as well to raise awareness about the roles they can play in stopping or responding to violence.

18. NDI and many of its partners in countries around the world have been working to implement and evaluate more specific solutions. For example, in 2016, NDI launched its “Votes Without Violence” program to tackle the issue of elections-related violence against women (i.e. voters, candidates, party agents, electoral officials). The focus of this initiative was to provide NDI’s global network of citizen observer group partners with support to monitor, mitigate and raise awareness of the issue.⁸ This we did through the development of a comprehensive manual and toolkit. Data collected from a number of observations have been visualized and are available on a unique dedicated website. We continue to collect case study examples of actions tried by political actors around the world, and to develop new generic tools and responses which can be tailored for different political contexts.

NDI’s #NotTheCost Campaign

19. In 2016, NDI launched the #NotTheCost campaign - a global call to action to raise awareness to stop violence against women in politics. The campaign was designed to bring together the stakeholders, networks and advocates involved in currently segmented discussions about the problem, to define the issue clearly, improve data collection for better advocacy, and present “opportunities for action” that each of them could take. We were privileged to have Jess Phillips MP, join us to deliver - alongside other politically active women - her testimony to the violence that she has faced in her political career.⁹

20. Under the broad umbrella of this campaign and working with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (SRVAW), Dr. Dubravka Šimonović, NDI developed an Incident Form for reporting violence against women in politics, allowing people worldwide to report incidents against politically active women safely.¹⁰ Submissions will be examined by the Special Rapporteur as inputs to a thematic report on the issue of violence against women in politics to be delivered 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. NDI will also use the incident reports submitted to build a repository of case studies to raise awareness, demonstrate opportunities for action against this violence, and increase the accountability of perpetrators.¹¹

⁸ National Democratic Institute. 2016, “Votes Without Violence: A Citizen Observer’s Guide to Addressing Violence Against Women in Elections.”

<http://www.voteswithoutviolence.org/sites/voteswithoutviolence.demcloud.org/files/Votes-Without-Violence-Toolkit.pdf>. Please also see the Votes Without Violence Website: <http://www.voteswithoutviolence.org/>.

⁹ National Democratic Institute. 2016, “Testimonies of Violence.” (See Appendix 1).

¹⁰ National Democratic Institute. 2017, “Incident Report Form.”

<http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>.

¹¹ National Democratic Institute. 2017, “Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics: Program Guidance.” <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/not-the-cost-program-guidance-final.pdf>.

Conclusion

21. In conclusion, from the viewpoint of its international expertise and specific focus on the violence that politically active women face, NDI is pleased to be able to contribute to the Committee's consideration of the important issue of the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates. We look forward to reviewing the Committee's 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
Washington DC, USA
8th September 2017

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections and promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

With three decades of experience in 132 countries, NDI is the leading organization working to advance women's political participation around the world. The Institute supports women's aspirations for inclusive and responsive government, by ensuring that they are able to participate, compete and lead as equal and active partners in democratic change whether as citizen activists, voters, political party workers, candidates or decision-makers.

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