

#NOT

STOPPING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
IN POLITICS

THE

A Renewed Call to Action

COST



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LtoR: Mimosa Kusari Lila of Kosovo, and Rowena Guanzon, member of the Elections Commission of the Philippines, at NDI's #NotTheCost workshop in May 2018.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As women advance toward equality, they continue to make historic gains in the political sphere. Women are active in a wide range of political roles—be it within civil society, in political parties, or local governments—and they are increasingly occupying leadership roles as mayors, cabinet ministers, prime ministers, and presidents. In fact, in the last 25 years, the number of women in parliaments worldwide has more than doubled, and rightly so. Equal participation of women within the political ecosystem is a fundamental human and civil right. Women's participation in politics results in real gains for democracy, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and more sustainable peace.

Yet, as women step forward to claim their right to participate in politics, they continue to face strong resistance from opponents of gender equality who use a wide range of tactics to target, undermine, and inhibit the participation of women in the political and public sphere. These acts may include psychological abuse, economic coercion, physical and sexual assault, and, in a growing trend, online violence and gendered disinformation. While political violence is not always gender specific, violence against women in politics has three distinct characteristics: it targets women explicitly because of their gender; its forms are gendered, as exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence; and its impact is to discourage women in particular from being or becoming politically-active.

In 2016, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched the [#NotTheCost campaign](#) to stop violence against women in politics, declaring that women's political participation should not come at the cost of violence, or even the threat of violence. Building on growing momentum around the world, NDI issued a global call to action to unify efforts to raise awareness of what this problem looks like, why it deserves global attention, and what solutions might be pursued. The call to action highlighted the need for stakeholders at the global, national, and local levels to take steps to ensure that women are able to fearlessly exercise their right to participate politically as civic leaders, activists, voters, political party members, candidates, elected representatives, and appointed officials.

On the fifth anniversary of the #NotTheCost campaign, NDI is renewing this call to action in order to reflect what has been learned and the progress that has been made since 2016. Over the last five years, important advances have been achieved and they have fostered a deeper understanding of the problem of gendered violence in politics and its effects. Extensive data collection and documentation on the incidence of this violence has inspired a growing list of solutions that have been adapted to different contexts around the world. However, several new challenges have also emerged. Adding to the existing prevalence of misogyny and sexism, democratic backsliding, a rise in "strong man" politics, and technological innovations have created new means of perpetrating violence against politically-active women.

Additionally, political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have allowed authoritarian regimes to exploit public health concerns to further restrict civic and political activity. Any systemic shock, such as a pandemic, affects women's voice, their access to information, the physical environment in which they live, and the gendered norms which determine their experience of disempowerment. In the specific case of COVID-19, public health responses have included stay-at-home orders which have increased the demands for women's time while decreasing the value assigned to it. Consequently, these orders have also made it easier to find and target women activists and have increased women's vulnerability to online attacks as more of their personal and political lives have moved to digital spaces. Occurrences of domestic violence have also increased exponentially as a result of the pandemic and lockdown measures.

Violence against women in politics is not restricted to any one part of the world, although depending on specific political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, the forms and the intensity of the violence may vary. Consistent with a growing body of national laws and international conventions on violence against women, the definition of violence is not limited to acts of physical harm. An NDI [study](#) on violence against women in political parties in 2018 revealed that while 20.3% of respondents had confronted physical violence while carrying out party functions, 85.9% had experienced psychological violence, including threats and coercion. These attacks are not evenly distributed, but differentially impact women based on their race, age, class, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Until recently, violence against women in politics was a largely invisible problem as women are frequently told that abuse, harassment, and assault are simply “the cost of doing politics.” As a result, violence was routinely normalized as part of a woman’s political experience and women grew used to dismissing it. Those who recognize these acts to be unacceptable are often strongly discouraged from reporting them in addition



Women who aspire to office, such as these mayoral candidates at an NDI leadership academy in Mexico, must be able to pursue those aspirations free from the fear of violence. (Photo credit: NDI)

to being threatened by colleagues and forced to remain silent. Many political women even struggle to find a vocabulary to describe their experiences. Some of these acts are explicitly prohibited under many legal frameworks and workplace codes of conduct in the same jurisdictions. Allowing violence to be the price women must pay to exercise their voice and agency politically leads to women’s self-censorship and/or exclusion with serious detrimental consequences for gender equality, human rights, and democracy.

Violence against women in politics doesn't just affect its immediate target; it also sends a message to other women that violence awaits them in the political sphere, and to society as a whole that women should not participate in politics. Research shows that reports of violence against high-profile women in politics discourages other women—particularly girls and younger women—from engaging with politics, thereby undermining their rights and reinforcing women's intergenerational exclusion from the political sphere. All violence against women is abuse and must be stopped. Any form of tolerance for violence amounts to the infringement of women's human rights, affronting their personal dignity, and hindering their rights to enjoy a life of good health, liberty, and security. Violence against women in politics is a threat to the integrity of democratic practice and culture. By excluding women and their perspectives, it disrupts the political process and impedes the will of voters. As a result, this type of violence denies society the benefits of the sustainable and responsive democratic governance that an inclusive political space can create.

The 2016 call to action presented a wide range of strategies to address and prevent violence against women in politics, focusing on the action that could be taken by potential changemakers from the global to the grassroots levels. Five years later, growing awareness has produced a set of actions to tackle this problem, offering practical and innovative solutions that help call out violence against women in politics, support the women experiencing it, and sanction perpetrators. The 2021 call to action highlights these emerging best practices and, because crucial systemic gaps still exist, it signals where, how, and by whom further actions still need to be taken.

Examples of promising initiatives are those being taken by international and regional organizations to set new norms and standards regarding violence against women in politics. There are new expectations of political parties to establish zero tolerance for violence against women party members, imposing sanctions on party members and representatives who perpetrate any such violence. Social media platforms are increasingly introducing new security and privacy settings for accounts to better protect against online violence targeting women and gendered disinformation. There are new tools available that allow politically-active women to assess their risks of violence and help them to develop safety plans to mitigate those risks.

Violence against women in politics, like any other form of violence against women, is rooted in gender inequality and therefore remains an intransigent problem worldwide. It is also a deeply political problem that, through the silencing or exclusion of women, can change political outcomes and thereby poses significant danger to democratic ideals.

The broad range of actions listed in this renewed call to action suggest that everyone, regardless of their political role, can do something to combat violence against women in politics. However, isolated actions are likely to have less impact than campaigns that succeed in mobilizing and coordinating the efforts of a large number of people in diverse locations, drawing on their differing strengths and capacities to influence change. The task ahead is not only to share existing practices or develop new strategies, but also to explore and nurture new partnerships that help identify and address political strategies that use violence against women in politics to undermine the potential for achieving inclusive and resilient democracies.

Violence against women in politics takes many forms, but shares a common intent to restrict and control women's political participation, preventing them from taking their equal places alongside men. (Photo credit: NDI, Pakistan.)



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