

VOTES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

OBSERVING GENDER AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE



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for NDI's Votes Without Violence program and toolkit.

Goal of Observing Violence against Women in Elections (VAW-E)

Election observers can have a powerful impact by making VAW-E visible. In the short term, this allows for mitigation of violence and makes people aware that this type of violence is happening. In the long term, it enables identification of long term solutions. Both approaches increase electoral integrity and the prospects for democratic elections. Violence against women should be considered in the design of an observation's methodology, terms of reference, and the forms or checklists observers use. It should also be part of an observer mission's reports and recommendations.

Violence against Women in Politics (VAW-P)

Over the last few decades, women around the world have made historic gains in politics and political life—as activists, civic leaders, voters, political party members, candidates, elected representatives and appointed officials—bringing with it a host of positive effects for women, democracy and society. Yet even as more women step forward, they are too often met by discrimination, harassment, psychological abuse—increasingly projected online—and physical or sexual assault. While all violence against women is unacceptable, violence against politically active women has two additional effects: it discourages women from being or becoming politically active, and it undermines the integrity of democratic practices. It is *not* the “cost of doing politics.” Rather, it *costs* politics the benefits of the sustainable and responsive democratic governance that an inclusive political space can create.

While political violence can be experienced by both men and women, the specific issue of **violence against women** in politics has three distinct characteristics:

- » It targets women *because* of their gender
- » In its very *form* it can be gendered, as exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence
- » It discourages *women in particular* from being or becoming politically active.

Violence against Women in Elections (VAW-E)

Violence against women is a targeted and destructive tool used in various ways throughout the electoral cycle to dissuade women from participating as **candidates, voters, election officials, observers, poll-watchers or activists**. This has critical implications for the integrity of the electoral process, because when women are prevented from participating fully and equally in elections, whether by voting, campaigning or otherwise exercising their political and civic rights, democratic processes are nullified.

The definition of **VAW-E** combines the UN's definition of violence against women and the definition of electoral violence:

- » **Violence against Women:** The UN defines violence against women as *any* act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.
- » **Electoral Violence:** Electoral conflict and violence is defined as the use or threat of force to harm persons or property involved in the electoral process, with the intention of influencing the conduct of electoral stakeholders and/or to affect the electoral process. Electoral violence can manifest through psychological abuse, threats, physical assault, blackmail, destruction of property or assassination.

From these roots, **VAW-E** can be defined as

- » *any act of gender-based election violence that is directed primarily at women, and that is a result of their aspirations to seek political office, their link to political activities (for example, working as election officials or attending campaign rallies) or simply their commitment to vote,*
- » *as well as any use or threat of force to harm persons or property with the intention of influencing the electoral process that has a disproportionate or different impact on women because of their marginalized and vulnerable status in society.*

It is also important to recognize that while both women and men can experience electoral violence, this general violence can have a disproportionately higher impact on women because they occupy a subordinate status in society and are more vulnerable to attacks. This increased vulnerability is linked to the structural barriers based on gender that impact women's participation. For example, although both men and women were victims during Cote d'Ivoire's 2010/11 post-election violence, research by the Organisation des Femmes Actives de Cote d'Ivoire (OFACI) revealed that women were often the first victims of party reprisals. Because they were home caring for children, they were more likely to be present during attacks and made for easier targets than men; they also had more difficulty escaping quickly because they had children under their care.

General Electoral Violence versus VAW-E

- » Men and women may both be victims of electoral violence such as murder, harassment and coercion. However, traditional definitions do not capture the additional acts and threats that target women candidates, activists, voters and election workers *because they are women*.
- » Social and traditional norms about gender shape *how* and *why* women are targeted by electoral violence, as well as what types of acts are pursued to curtail or influence their participation.
- » Unlike men, women experience familial or social intimidation in private spaces, such as the home, or violence and intimidation from members and leaders of their own political party. The goal of such violence may be aimed directly at upholding traditional female roles, effectively shutting women out of politics or controlling their participation.

Factors that contribute to VAW-E¹

Factors that contribute to VAW-E vary between regions and countries, but can include:

- » Opposition to women's leadership
- » Women's economic dependency, illiteracy, limited family support, lack of education or access to education, lack of access to information or their burden of responsibilities at home
- » Discriminatory social and cultural attitudes, a society's culture of violence or impunity (particularly political violence) or the absence of supportive administrative and judicial structures, including inadequate rule of law and governance institutions.

What to Look for: Types of Violence Committed against Women in Elections

VAW-E can occur in a variety of ways and be perpetrated by many different types of actors. Examples range from verbal harassment to intimidation and coercion to more physical forms of violence such as sexual harassment, rape, abuse and murder. For the purposes of recording and assessing violence, it can be categorized into five main categories: *physical, sexual, psychological, threats and coercion, and economic*.

The following table highlights the ways in which violence can occur in both public and private life, at all levels of society, to impact women's ability to participate in elections as candidates, voters, election officials, observers, poll-watchers or activists.²

Types of Violence	Tends to Occur	Victims	Perpetrators	Aims
Physical: Murder, assault, kidnapping	Grassroots level or in the home; at the societal and political levels	Women leaders and activists; women voters, candidates or election officials	Opposition or own parties, extremist organizations, family or community members, security forces	Win inter- or intra-party conflicts, maintain the status quo of women's subordinate role in society
Sexual: Rape or sexual assault, sexual harassment or exploitation	Publicly or privately, in situations of political unrest and high-stakes elections; or within the home or a woman's own political party	Women activists, voters, candidates or party members, election officials	Security forces, warring forces, competing male politicians, husbands or family members	To deter or control women's political participation as candidates or administrators; to force women to vote for someone else's preferred candidate
Psychological: Slander and defamation, character attacks, harassment (including by the media), gendered insults, hate speech, equating women's political participation with immoral practices, incitement to commit violence	In the national or local media or social media; at the community level; within the home or a woman's own political party; as a tool during nomination or campaign processes	Women candidates or activists, voters, election officials	Opposition parties or members of women's own parties, male leaders, family or community members, media outlets	To deter women from being elected, to stop women from active participation in election process, to maintain and increase male-dominated power
Threats and Coercion: Threats, false accusations, intimidation, false assessment of the environment, blackmail, pressure or coercion	Police stations; councils; within political parties or committees; within the home, office or community	Women candidates, party leaders or members, women voters, activists, election officials	Leaders or members of opposition parties or own parties, police, colleagues, family or community members	To prevent or control women contesting elections, taking office, voting or participating in election administration, stop women's expression of their own political opinions or priorities
Economic: Economic control, denial or delay in providing financial resources that are otherwise available, property damage	Publicly or privately; within political parties during nomination or campaign processes; in the home	Women candidates or party members, voters, activists, election officials	Leaders or members of own parties, election administrators, family or community members	To block or restrict women's access to resources available to men and so prevent their expression of their own political viewpoints or priorities.

Election Observation and VAW-E

Citizen election observation groups can play a critical role in recording, mitigating and assessing the impact of VAW-E on electoral processes in their countries. Some of the key steps and best practices these groups must consider are listed below.

Pre-Election Period:³

- » Citizen groups undertaking election observation should identify and reach out to a network of stakeholders before they begin their observation:
 - Some of these stakeholders should be in a position to provide information on the context of women's political participation and violence against women, which will help the observation group in the design of its priorities and methodology.
 - Other stakeholders should be specifically targeted for their ability to address VAW-E if it is observed. These might include local authorities or community leaders, and security forces such as the police, political parties or electoral management bodies.
- ✓ Women's civil society organizations focused on gender-based violence and/or women's rights organizations should be consulted to help identify key stakeholders already engaged in this issue that can help with data collection, training or mitigation.
- ✓ It may be necessary to train security forces, poll workers or election officials, or groups focused on victims' services or other social service providers to understand and respond to security challenges or situations confronting women during the electoral cycle as a part of a group's mitigation strategy.
- ✓ If a citizen observer group is unable to collect information on VAW-E as part of its efforts, it should identify key partners who are monitoring VAW-E and who can share information so the observer group can include it in its statements.

Election Period:

- » When warning signs of VAW-E are identified, either on election day or during the pre-election period, observers will need to decide who the most appropriate actor for resolving it is. For instance, if observers view a party member harassing a woman from the same party, they may choose to engage party leadership and the election commission to address the issue, rather than turning to the police. Any mechanisms for response or relaying information should be identified well before election day so observers are well-trained and the necessary systems are in place beforehand.
- » Observers stationed in polling stations or communities on election day or during the pre-election period should receive thorough advance training from the citizen observation group on how to recognize the most likely types of violence. This training should include the kinds of victims and perpetrators as well as the type(s) of violence, and should provide illustrative information to help observers recognize violence that they might not otherwise identify as such. Illustrative information can include an overview of gender-based violence to orient observers in the larger political and social context.
- » Early warning systems, information technology and social media platforms, such as anonymous hotlines, SMS-based citizen reporting mechanisms and other crowdsourcing efforts, can be used to collect reports from affected women and to gain further insight into such violence (i.e., by mapping the reports to generate hot-spot maps). One advantage of these mechanisms is that they can be more anonymous than other methods of reporting—important because women are less likely than men to report violence, often out of fear of reprisals.

Post-Election Period:

- » When possible, public statements and reports should include information assessing the participation of women in the election process and making recommendations to improve it. This should include assessing the prevalence and impact of VAW-E, and how to address it. Citizen observation groups should use data they collected to assess perpetrators, targets and type(s) of violence, and present this analysis as part of their statements and reports. Data collected by other groups on VAW-E can also be useful for internal analysis and to inform these reports, but that information should remain separate from the observer group's own data.

- » Data collected on VAW-E during an election can be a powerful tool for advocacy to address and prevent violence women in future election cycles and between elections by changing laws or the internal policies and protocols of political parties, election management bodies or other groups, such as security forces. Citizen observation groups interested in pursuing such advocacy should build on the relationships established during their monitoring and mitigation efforts to gain allies and push effectively for change.

NOTES

1. Causes/factors drawn from South Asia Partnership International's *Combating Violence against Women in Politics: Revisiting Policies, Politics and Participation Proceeding Report*, 2008.
2. This chart is adapted from South Asia Partnership International, 2009, 'Thematic Report on Violence against Women in Politics 2009', To the United Nations Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), SAP International, with Collaboration from Lawyers Collective Women's Rights Initiative, <http://www.vawip.org/thematic-report-violence-against-women-politics-2009-0>
3. These best practices are based in part on recommendations included in *Bardall, Gabrielle. 2011. Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender and Electoral Violence. Washington, DC: IFES. http://www.ifes.org/~media/Files/Publications/White%20PaperReport/2011/Gender_and_Electoral_Violence_2011.pdf*