

GUIDANCE NOTE

PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS



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LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE SECTION
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I. INTRODUCTION

This Guidance Note provides technical advice to UN Women and country teams on how they can support Member States to address violence against women in politics (VAWP). It draws on existing definitions, insights and framing generated from research, normative advancements and programmatic collaboration, including: the Report of the Secretary-General for the 65th Commission on the Status of Women on *Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls* (E/CN.6/2021/3); key messages for the UN system on VAWP adopted by the UN Executive Committee in 2020 ([Annex A](#)); a thematic report of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on VAWP submitted to the 73rd regular session of the UN General Assembly (2018), UN Women and UNDP's programming guide on [Preventing violence against women in elections](#); two expert group meetings and a global mapping of lessons learned and good practices of UN Women Country Offices (COs).¹

This Guidance Note therefore focuses primarily on women in politics but it likewise applies to violence against women in public life more broadly, including that perpetrated against women human rights defenders, journalists, those active in civil society and in other areas of public life. It can also be used to guide and inform the work of other United Nations agencies and development partners.

VAWP is recognized internationally as a violation of women's political rights and a major barrier to women's political representation in the 2021 Report of the Secretary-General on *Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls* the United Nations Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2018 on Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: sexual harassment ([A/RES/73/148 17](#)), among other normative documents. It is not a 'normal' part of politics; for VAWP to be confronted systematically, reduce the risk of violence, and transform policy and practice, women need greater representation in political and public life. At the same time, it is critical that perpetrators are held accountable, impunity ended, and governments,

legislatures, and the public sector – including judiciary and electoral bodies – promote long-term and integrated institutional solutions.

UN Women specifically includes VAWP in its Strategic Plan (2018–2021) under the thematic priority on Women's Political Empowerment and Leadership. Strategic Plan Output 4 states: "More women of all ages fully participate, lead and engage in political institutions and processes". Indicator 4.4 focuses particularly on the "number of initiatives developed and/or being implemented to monitor violence against women in politics, with UN Women's support", while Output 1.3 refers to "strengthened capacities of key stakeholders to design and implement initiatives to mitigate VAWP".

The UN plays an important role in supporting both State and non-State actors to implement policy and programme actions to address VAWP at country level. The UN can, for example, partner with national, regional, and international organizations to raise awareness, support prevention programming and further research. Offices at HQ, regional and country levels can collaborate to address VAWP through regional and country programming. UN country teams can provide support to national partners. Relevant agencies across the UN System can also coordinate to ensure policy coherence and harmonized approaches to preventing violence and work together with the office of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women its causes and consequences (SRVAW).

This Guidance Note is designed to support these efforts.

Section I includes this [Introduction](#).

Section II covers key [Concepts and norms](#) about VAWP, including definitions and normative frameworks.

Section III includes comprehensive [Practical guidance for addressing VAWP at country level](#) on assessment and research, common types of support to national partners and designing and implementing VAWP interventions.

Section IV offers guidance on [Designing and implementing VAWP programming interventions](#) in electoral and non-electoral contexts, and navigating potentially sensitive considerations in both.

The [Annexes](#) contain support tools and information resources, including key messages on VAWP for the UN System, tools for implementing various programming options, and additional reading.

II. CONCEPTS AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS

1. What is violence against women in politics? Definitions and manifestations

Violence against women in politics is a form of gender-based violence against women (GBVAW).² VAWP is any act, or threat, of physical, sexual or psychological violence that prevents women from exercising and realizing their political rights and a range of human rights.³ VAWP manifests in specific, gendered ways including, but not limited to, the following examples.

- *Physical violence*: including assassinations, kidnappings, beatings – often with the intent to force women to resign or withdraw from political life.
- *Sexual violence*: including sexual harassment, unwanted advances and sexual assault, rape, sexualized threats, altered pornographic or sexualized images intended to publicly question women’s competencies and shame them.
- *Psychological violence*: including threats, character assassination, stalking, online abuse as well as economic violence such as denial of salary or political financing, property theft or damage.⁴

BOX 1: DEFINITIONS

UN Women and UNDP:

“Violence against women in political life is any act of, or threat of, gender-based violence, resulting in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women, that prevents them from exercising and realizing their political rights, whether in public or private spaces, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and to freely campaign, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy freedom of opinion and expression. Such violence can be perpetrated by a family member, community member and or by the State.”⁵

Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on violence against women in politics:

“[Violence against women in politics], including in and beyond elections, consists of any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately.”⁶

Victims and perpetrators

Victims and survivors of VAWP may include political office holders, women candidates and aspirants, political supporters, voters, election workers and observers, public officials, and civil servants. In broader public life, civil society activists, media workers and human rights defenders may also be targets of violence. Family members or activists associated with targeted women are also affected. Women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination – e.g. based on age, sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnicity – and those with certain political views or associations with human rights activism are likely more vulnerable to violence.

VAWP can be perpetrated offline and online, both publicly and privately by other politicians, constituents, family members and strangers, voters, traditional or religious leaders, political opponents and members of political parties, the media and journalists, or State actors, among other communities and actors. Online, it can be perpetrated by the same people and by anonymous trolls and bots.

Magnitude of VAWP

Violence against women in politics has lasting, harmful impacts on the individuals concerned and broader society. It hampers political and electoral processes and institutions' credibility and legitimacy. The experience, threat, or fear of VAWP dissuades many women from pursuing or continuing political careers, electoral campaigns, and related activities, as well as other forms of public activism. Altogether, VAWP violates women's human rights and political rights.

Unfortunately, the problem of VAWP remains under-explored and the data to assess its magnitude is not captured. Women do not usually report violence for fear of retaliation, stigma or not being believed. In politics and elections, additional reputational risks exacerbate these fears. Members of women's own political parties, or even their families, may be the perpetrators. Within political parties, members may not speak about violence fearing their partisan loyalties and discipline will be questioned (i.e. 'what happens in the party stays in the party'). In generally violent contexts, and based on social norms, VAWP may be perceived as 'coming with the territory'.

Lack of data and awareness of VAWP impedes efforts to design and implement effective policies and legislation for prevention and elimination of violence. Too rarely are perpetrators held to account and survivors provided with access to timely and appropriate remedies and services.

Institutions meant to provide access to justice and service delivery for women experiencing and reporting violence are not equipped to produce reliable data on the phenomenon's magnitude. Additionally, quantitative studies, which should guarantee women confidentiality when disclosing sensitive information, are largely missing; where they do take place, they do not generate global, comparative data. This hinders larger scale measurement of VAWP prevalence.

There are, however, some indicative studies that suggest VAWP is pervasive and global.

- More than 80 per cent of the women members of parliament (MPs) interviewed for a 2016 global study experienced psychological violence; one in three, economic violence; one in four, physical violence; and one in five experienced sexual violence in their work in parliament.⁷ More than 40 per cent of women MPs and parliamentary staff in Europe interviewed for a 2018 study experienced sexual

harassment on the job – a fact that led many to consider leaving politics altogether.⁸ Recently, women parliamentarians reported experiencing nearly twice as much exposure to torture, ill treatment and acts of violence than men, with the COVID-19 pandemic potentially exacerbating violent threats.⁹

- A 2016 survey on VAWP, as experienced by women candidates in Colombia, showed that 63 per cent of survey respondents were victims of violent acts and, in most cases, perpetrators were colleagues from the same institution (47 per cent) or the same political party (34 per cent).¹⁰
- Over 2,000 cases of electoral violence recorded in six countries between 2006 and 2010 showed women and men experience electoral violence differently: women were twice as likely as men to face psychological abuse, while men were more likely to face physical harm.¹¹

2. What is the normative framework?

Women's rights to participate and live free from violence

An extensive human rights-based framework demonstrates the commitment of the international community to promote and protect women's rights to participate in political and public office and live a life free from violence.¹² States have an obligation to promote and protect universal human rights and fundamental freedoms. Discrimination on the basis of sex is contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW 1979), among other human rights instruments. In addition, States Parties agreed to the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that established the international target of gender balance in decision-making.

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) provided a comprehensive definition of VAW, committed States and the international community to its elimination, and provided a framework for national and international action.¹³ The universal adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 provides further impetus to States to ensure full and effective political participation of women at all levels of decision-making (Target 5.5) and to eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres (Target 5.2).

Normative references to VAWP

In recognition of the need to address structural barriers to women's political participation, in 2018 the UN General Assembly in its Resolution 73/148 expressed that it was “*deeply concerned* about all acts of violence, including sexual harassment, against women and girls involved in political and public life, including women in leadership positions, journalists and other media workers and human rights defenders.” It called specifically upon national legislative authorities and political parties to adopt zero tolerance codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, or to revise existing ones.¹⁴

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women presented a thematic report prior to the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly in 2018. The report underscores the importance of designing, adopting, and enforcing laws and policies on gender equality and the prevention of VAW that are consistent with international human rights law. It also lays out concrete actions that State and non-State actors can take to “combat impunity” and “strengthen complaint mechanisms and response protocols in line with international and regional standards by, for instance, issuing guidelines, codes of conduct and protocols for institutions like parliaments, electoral management bodies, political parties, electoral courts, legislative chambers or local administrations, and ensure enforcement mechanisms are functional”.¹⁵

A series of UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council (HRC) resolutions, focused on GBVAW, outline the obligations of States to address this vital issue and call for an environment with zero tolerance for VAWP. In 2013, a report to the HRC of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women in law and in practice (WGDAW) notes the need to: “Accelerate efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women, including through a comprehensive legal framework to combat impunity, in order to fulfil women’s human

rights and to improve the enabling conditions for women’s participation in political and public life”.¹⁶

Likewise in 2013, the CEDAW Committee’s General recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations stated that substantive progress towards equal participation of women is impossible without appropriate measures, such as ensuring that women voters and political candidates are not subject to violence either by State or private actors (para 72). It further recommended States adopt policies of zero tolerance for all forms of violence that undermine women’s participation, including against women campaigning for public office or exercising their right to vote (para 73-f).¹⁷

Specific recognition of VAWP first appeared in UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130. Sponsored by the United States, and adopted without a vote in 2012, the resolution urges all States to act, encourages the United Nations system and other organizations to enhance their assistance to States in their efforts to investigate allegations of violence, assault or harassment of women elected officials and candidates and create an environment of zero tolerance for such offences.¹⁸

The international normative framework places States as the key actors responsible for addressing VAWP, as they have a duty to prevent, investigate and punish all acts of VAW prohibited under international human rights standards.¹⁹ Regional instruments, human rights bodies and other mechanism similarly hold States accountable. It falls within the respective mandates of State actors to create and carry out normative, legislative, judicial, and institutional actions to enable, initiate and implement solutions to VAWP. No actor alone, however, can eliminate VAWP completely. Cooperation between State and key non-State stakeholders – including political parties, the media, independent human rights monitoring mechanisms and civil society groups – is important and necessary given their interdependence and intersecting mandates.

III. PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR ADDRESSING VAWP AT COUNTRY LEVEL

Several UN country teams, partner agencies and national partners have requested support from UN Women to address VAWP in various ways including with research and data collection, support to national institutions for monitoring and prevention, capacity-building of national partners, strengthening complaints mechanisms, legislative and policy reform and raising awareness. Through global examples, this section provides practical guidance on these different areas of technical support and programming intervention.

1. Building the evidence-base on VAWP

Evidence gathering and research is a crucial early step in designing VAWP programming. It helps document women's experiences, determine the magnitude of violence, types of violence, victims, perpetrators, and locations, as well as indicate what contexts pose greater risk to women. Research can show whether the legislative and policy framework has provisions that address VAWP, if legal reform is required or if new laws are needed, and whether there are mechanisms and institutions that can regulate, prevent and respond to VAWP using their respective mandates and capacities. Importantly, it also helps capture lessons learned from prevention efforts and spur innovation in programme design. While VAWP affects women exerting their political rights, and other papers and guidance covering human rights defenders and CSOs among others exist, the proposed guidance and methodology in this section is specific to assessing

Various research and mapping approaches and sources of data can be used including: women's testimonies; qualitative studies; administrative information on reported cases of VAWP and their management; election monitoring; media content studies; interviews with relevant stakeholders, and sample surveys targeting voters, electoral candidates, office holders, and other categories of persons at risk of VAWP. Data generated by these sources vary in terms of which aspects are, or can be, measured, which categories of women in politics at risk of violence, the type of statistical measurement, and data collection principles.

BOX 2:

Proposed UN Women measurement framework for VAWP:

- **Aspects of measurement** – such as the magnitude, types/forms, severity and intensity of violence, risk and protective factors, consequences of VAWP, institutional responses and contexts that may influence perpetrators' motivations (e.g. gender policy issues or norms about gender roles);
- **Categories of women in politics at risk of violence** – such as voters, electoral candidates or aspirants, members of political parties and of political office, including consideration

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