

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Violence against Women in Politics: An Urgent Problem the Political Science Community Must Take Seriously

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Violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is an urgent problem worldwide. At the time of this writing, U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's husband had just been violently assaulted by a conspiracy theorist, shouting "Where is Nancy?" after breaking into their house. In Canada, women, Indigenous, Black, racialized, and queer political actors face harassment and threats on a regular basis. During the 2022 Québec provincial election, politician Marwah Rizqy received death threats from a man who allegedly called the police to inform them where they could find her body (she was pregnant at the time). In 2022, federal Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland was accosted by a man who yelled profanities at her while she was with her all-women staff. These are not isolated incidents, and the political science community has an important role to play in addressing them.

What Can Political Scientists Do to Address Violence against Women in Politics?

Research on VAWIP is developing, but gaps remain.¹ The first academic book written on this topic was Krook's *Violence against Women in Politics*, published by Oxford University Press in 2020—just three years ago. Prior to this, formative contributions include Piscopo (2016); Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016); and Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020). This scholarship builds on important contributions from global women practitioners, particularly in Latin America.

The first gap is evidence based. More data are needed to document the prevalence and scope of VAWIP in all parts of the world. Replication of data findings and the development of shared concepts to better understand and create tools to address VAWIP are ongoing. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg's (2023)

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edited volume, *Gender and Violence against Political Actors*, is a welcome addition to the field, as it expands and deepens our understanding of the relationships among gender, politics, and violence in a global comparative context. Future research that examines violence in politics from an intersectional perspective is further needed, such as that pioneered by Kuperberg (2018, 2021). Those in academic leadership positions and funding agencies can help fill these research gaps by funding researchers, including graduate and undergraduate students, who are engaged in the study of violence against women in politics through scholarships and grant programs.

There are also policy and legislative gaps. Partly in response to the 2017 wave of the #MeToo movement founded by Tarana Burke, some legislatures have developed new codes of conduct and policies to address violence and harassment. In some cases, lawmakers have adopted these new rules without sufficient data or evidence on how to best combat the problem. Theories, concepts, and methods that are grounded in political science research—and that draw from interdisciplinary sources such as gender and critical race studies, psychology, business, and sociology—can help decision makers and practitioners develop best practices to address VAWIP.

What Specific Activities Have You Been Involved with to Combat This Problem?

One of my research goals is to highlight how the problem of gender-based violence in politics is not one that occurs in emerging democracies exclusively; it is also a serious problem in established democracies. Despite Canada's international reputation as a global leader on women's rights, gender-based violence remains a serious problem in Canadian society and politics. In addition to insufficient action to address the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (Misra et al. 2022), sexual assault and harassment remain endemic in several Canadian institutions, including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Armed Forces. In 2022, Hockey Canada—a national organization of significant cultural importance in the country—was confronted with its own scandal of concealing sexual assault cases within the organization from members of the public. Through the use of nondisclosure agreements that legally require victims of abuse to remain silent, private sector organizations, as well as governments and legislatures, have been able to conceal the scope and depth of the problem of gender-based violence in workplaces across the country.

Through my research, I show how VAWIP is also an issue in Canada's political institutions and processes. In work with Cheryl N. Collier, we apply the concepts and methods of political science (specifically, feminist institutionalism) to legislative codes of conduct and policies on sexual harassment. While Canadian lawmakers have taken steps to address VAWIP, our results reveal the serious flaws of some of these measures, which include a lack of transparency on the widespread nature of this problem (Collier and Raney 2018). Our research further serves as a cautionary note for other countries as they develop their own codes of conduct and anti-harassment policies (Raney and Collier 2023). In a forthcoming

coedited volume, *Gender-Based Violence in Canadian Politics in the #MeToo Era* with the University of Toronto Press Collier and I bring together a range of experts to expand existing theories and methods on VAWIP, including the violence faced by Indigenous women political actors (Rebecca Major and Cynthia Niioo-bineh-seh-kwe Stirbys), the harassment experienced by political staffers (Meagan Cloutier), media portrayals of gender-based violence in politics (Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant), and gender-based violence in municipal politics (Kate Graham).

Given the scope and depth of the problem, VAWIP scholars must also work with practitioners to exchange knowledge and share resources. In 2017, I led a federally funded project in partnership with Equal Voice, a national, nonprofit, multipartisan organization that seeks to promote more women in politics. The project had three goals: (1) co-create knowledge with the community partner, (2) raise awareness about the issue with stakeholders and members of the public, and (3) enhance public policy discussions with proposed solutions to help tackle this problem in Canada. Our team wrote a comprehensive scope report to help the organization build its research capacity and develop its advocacy work to address this problem; the report is freely available on the organization's website (Raney et al. 2019).

I have also contributed to dialogues and roundtables with other academics and practitioners globally. This included an expert panel organized by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in preparation for a 2022 toolkit that it prepared to assist women political actors who experience violence and harassment globally (OSCE 2022). I have further shared my knowledge with political leaders and legislative administrators seeking to better understand the issue.

Additionally, I have sought to raise awareness about VAWIP in public venues, through media interviews, public panels, open access reports, on social media, and in op-eds. Awareness raising is a key solution to addressing this problem, as it helps to "de-normalize" violence perpetrated against women political actors (Krook 2020, 217). The advantage of public engagement for scholars is that it allows for quick and timely interventions while the media and public are focused on the issue, such as in 2019, when the constituency office window of Canada's minister of environment and climate change, Catherine McKenna, was spray-painted with a vile, misogynistic slur (Raney 2019).

However, it is important to recognize that I am in a position of considerable privilege to speak freely and openly about VAWIP: I am a white settler woman with tenure at a university that values public engagement. Some scholars may not be in a similar position where they can speak as freely on this topic. Experts who are in positions of social and institutional power have a unique and important opportunity to influence public discourse to help counteract the threats democracies are facing worldwide, including VAWIP.

Finally, emerging research demonstrates that women—especially women of color—face significant barriers when it comes to political participation, including higher rates of violence and harassment. To help address the underrepresentation of women leaders, in 2018, I co-created a program at my university called "Women in the House," which is an experiential learning course for

students who identify as women to help boost their leadership skills.² The course was co-designed and is co-taught annually with a former member of Parliament (MP), Peggy Nash, and includes a professional development workshop and an opportunity for students to travel to Parliament Hill and shadow a woman MP for a day. The goal of the program is to provide mentorship to young women leaders in different fields so they might see themselves reflected in the political process. Although a small step, experiential learning programs in political science provide opportunities to help develop the leadership skills and aspirations of young women who are passionate about social justice and change.

What Are the Challenges and/or Limitations in Addressing VAWIP?

There are challenges with conducting research that is critical of gendered/colonial/raced/queer power dynamics and structures that other political scientists do not face in the same way. In elite interviews, I am often engaging with subjects who disclose deeply personal stories about their experiences of violence or harassment and share feelings of fear, helplessness, and sometimes anger. In these interview settings, as a researcher, I feel a sense of responsibility to make sure I am getting these stories “right” and doing them justice in a way that will help create positive change. On a human level, I feel empathy and anger that the problem exists at all, that it is so widespread, and that it does not appear to be going away.

Publishing research and offering public commentary that pinpoints the systemic failures of political institutions to uproot their sexist/racist underpinnings may have negative “downstream” effects on future data collection. Some legislators may not want to provide their expert knowledge to scholars who are deeply critical of their workplaces, including how their efforts to address VAWIP have been insufficient to date. One way I have sought to tackle this challenge is to ensure that I am also telling the stories of the critical actors who are committed to substantive change inside political institutions, documenting their failures and their successes.

Academics who study VAWIP—and gender and politics broadly—can also experience resistance and backlash themselves, including micro-aggressions, “maninterruptions,” “mansplaining,” gender-based insults, threats, and harassment. This behavior occurs at academic conferences, in interactions with university colleagues, in classrooms, and on social media. Developing a network of scholars, activists, and friends of women and men who can offer mentorship and allyship is an important strategy to counteract the negative workplace interactions and experiences women and others in the academy face today.

The final challenge in addressing VAWIP is pedagogical. A fundamental goal of VAWIP—and gender and politics scholarship broadly—is to create safer, less toxic, and more inclusive decision-making spaces for everyone. Yet, at the same time, our research shows that these spaces are hostile for women, especially queer women and women of color. This reality poses a challenge in the classroom, where we want to encourage the next generation of students to engage in a political process that is likely to be challenging for, if not inhospitable to, them.

There is no easy solution to this dilemma, but my strategy has been to arm my students with as much information as possible which includes sharing my own research and the research findings of other scholars that documents the challenges women face when they engage in the political process. Knowledge is power.

At the same time, students can be provided with supports and resources through role models, mentors, sponsors, guest speakers, leadership shadowing programs and films and documentaries that feature strong women's leadership. Practitioner resources like those available through the National Democratic Institute and other organizations are also useful, and they can help political science students navigate their future careers, whether it be as a community leader, policy analyst, human rights worker, or elected official. When given the necessary knowledge and tools, in my experience, many young women political science students appear ready and willing to advocate for social justice in whatever career lies ahead of them.

Notes

1. The gaps identified here are illustrative and non-exhaustive.
2. See <https://www.torontomu.ca/arts/students/undergraduate/tmu-women-in-the-house/>.

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