



## Defending Democracy in Digital Spaces: Ending Violence Against Women in Politics Online

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### *Executive Summary*

Political violence is unfolding in our pockets – on our phones and devices and across the social media we consume – and it is targeting women in politics. This paper analyzes trends emerging from IFES’ global qualitative and quantitative social media research in 7 countries (Zimbabwe, Haiti, Afghanistan, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Ukraine). Gender-based online violence is a global phenomenon; in each country IFES has researched, we find salient examples of online aggression linked to women’s political participation and expression of free speech.

Our research takes a nuanced look at the contours of violence against women in politics online (VAWP-Online). These interim findings of IFES’ ongoing research reveal an intensifying spiral of online incivility, information disorders, hate speech and overt violence directed at women in public leadership roles. We find that VAWP-Online has distinct contours and patterns:

- VAWP-Online is globally pervasive but culturally specific;
- VAWP-Online often initiates in urban centers and spreads, including outside national borders
- Attacks against women politicians are susceptible to going viral;
- Women often face sustained and intense levels of online abuse;
- Any given incident of VAWP-Online can involve dozens, hundreds or even thousands of perpetrators located nationally, regionally or globally;
- VAWP-Online targets both high profile women and local-level and emerging women leaders in distinct ways; and
- VAWP-Online may vary according to factors such as electoral system and quota design.

The impacts of this violence are diverse. VAWP-Online often has a silencing effect on participation and free speech. However, at the same time VAWP-Online has also sparked public outrage and galvanized efforts to end online abuse by raising awareness, engaging in activism and policy reform.

The analysis of impacts and trends reveals that gendered online harassment and abuse also targets political men in the form of homophobia. This is detrimental to fostering inclusion in democracy because it preserves politics as a heteronormative domain that prizes hypermasculinity. Given that VAWP extends beyond domestic borders, further research is needed to determine the extent to which it could potentially be used as a tool of foreign interference by authoritarian influencers such as Russia. However, challenges in this area of research include data privacy issues, lack of geolocation data, and widespread use of virtual private networks (VPN). Finally, we observe that high levels of impunity and little regulation are holding back progress to addressing VAWP-Online.

Going forward, researchers and practitioners need to adapt tools and program interventions to address this new contour of political violence. Political violence in online spaces needs to be measured appropriately and responded to accordingly. To fully capture the scope and scale of VAWP-online, it is necessary to recognize multiple, interconnected cyber spaces where VAWP occurs and to adapt metrics of measurement to account for volume, speed, and intensity of online aggression.

The sheer scale and severity of VAWP-Online can seem overwhelming but by developing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the patterns and trends emerging in this area, political stakeholders can

become better equipped to adapt and respond to VAWP online. Ending VAWP-Online is essential to protecting democracy and empowering free speech and participation without discrimination or fear.

## About the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

Together we build democracies that deliver for all. Our independent expertise strengthens electoral institutions/systems and builds local capacity to deliver sustainable solutions. As the global leader in democracy promotion, we advance good governance and democratic rights by providing technical assistance; empowering the underrepresented to participate in the political process; and applying field-based research to improve the electoral cycle. Since 1987, IFES has worked in more than 145 countries across the globe.

Democratic institutions flourish when all groups of society are represented. IFES initiatives around the world seek to increase the participation, influence and representation of citizens in political processes and governance structures. Building a community of informed and empowered people is a crucial component of a healthy and resilient democracy. IFES supports a variety of civic education and training initiatives. This includes informing voters of their rights and responsibilities and conducting leadership and advocacy trainings to empower citizens to have a voice in the way they are governed.

IFES recognizes that violence against women in elections and gender-based violence can affect women's participation, and therefore threaten the integrity of the electoral process, as well as the commitment of governments to a credible and inclusive democratic process. IFES developed the VAWE Framework, which helps election stakeholders to enhance knowledge and improve analysis related to gender, development, and conflict. IFES has completed VAWE assessments in Zimbabwe, Haiti, Afghanistan, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Sri Lanka and Ukraine.