

Challenges to the study of Violence against Women in Politics

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In recent years, International Organizations, Women's Associations, and a large number of different actors around the world have called attention to the problem of "Violence against Women in Politics" (VAWIP). This problem has been also called violence against women in elections; political violence against women; harassment against women in politics; sexism or discrimination. (ACOBOL 1999; Bardall 2011; Escalante and Mendez 2011; Quintanilla 2012; SAP International 2006; Thirsk 2015). Regardless of the name used, this refers to the use of violence against women politicians. Although we know very little, as academic research has only recently started to pay attention, this seems to be an extensive phenomenon, with organizations reporting that between 40% of women candidates up to 80% of women politicians, have suffered from some form of violence while doing their jobs (ACOBOL 2012; IPU 2016; Jurado Nacional de Elecciones 2015; Restrepo Sanin 2016).

This paper will focus on three main questions regarding the topic of violence against women in politics. The first section will discuss the issue of definition and will make a case for the use of the word 'violence' in order to understand these actions, and for the word 'backlash' to understand the larger motivations and contexts in which these actions happen. The second section will be focused on the methodological challenges faced in the study of violence and backlash against women in politics. The final section will focus on the role of contexts in explaining the manifestations that we can find.

Definitions

In this first section, I focus my attention on the distinctions between backlash, resistance, opposition, and violence. From my experience doing research on violence and harassment against women in politics in Latin America, 'backlash' and 'violence' are the most pertinent concepts for understanding this issue.

There is a fundamental difference between 'backlash' and 'violence' but they are intimately related. Backlash refers to "The resistance of those in power to attempts to change the status quo... a reaction by a group declining in a felt sense of power" (Mansbridge and Shames 2008, 625). In this sense, backlash refers to attitudes and beliefs –about how power should be distributed–, but also actions.

In the context of women's political participation, backlash refers to actions, attitudes, and beliefs against women's political participation, and the measures designed to improve it. This backlash, I think, is triggered by the sense that women's advancement 'has gone too far' and that men are losing power –in reality, they are losing privileges that were granted just on the basis of their sex, and very frequently, of

their race. Under this assumption, individual attacks on a woman do not constitute backlash. Instead, we talk about ‘backlash’ when these attacks are directed at different women and for apparently different reasons, because they are targeting the advancement of *all* women.

Backlash, then, needs to be contextually understood and analyzed: one cannot speak of ‘backlash’ if there is no evidence of progress. In regards to the issue of women’s participation, it is evident that progress has been made: women’s presence in legislative bodies globally has doubled in the last thirty years (IPU 2017). Women’s participation in other spheres of public life, such as labor market participation or presence in institutions of higher education has also increased.

Because backlash constitutes actions of resistances against progress, they can be violent and non-violent. For example, a political party leader may not support women’s increased participation without necessarily resorting to violence. They can, however, use their power to curtail women’s inclusion by, for example, assigning women to unwinnable districts (Baldez 2004). This tactic has been widely used in countries around the world to both appear to comply and subvert gender quota laws at the same time. This form of opposition or resistance is not violent because it is not directed at any particular woman, nor does it affect any particular woman or women’s wellbeing and personal integrity, even if it affects a woman’s career and finances (given that she would have to spend time and resources on a campaign that is doomed to fail). These actions, although not violent, are important in relation to this issue, because they contextualize the problem and support some of the assumptions that research on VAWIP has made.

Mansbridge and Shames (2008) emphasize that backlash is “the use of coercive power”(626), thus it is not surprising that opposition to the loss of men’s privileges as political actors results in violence against those who are gaining power, that is, women. Although there does not seem to be a lot of research on this issue, anecdotal evidence suggests that, indeed, we are witnessing a backlash. This backlash, however, is not only against ‘women politicians’ but seems to be manifested against women active in the public sphere more broadly¹. In the United States, women activists in different fields, from the video game industry (Dewey 2014), and tech companies (Mundy 2017), to journalism (Greenslade 2015) and the entertainment industry (Silman 2016) have been savagely attacked by men –and sometimes women- because they have questioned sexist, racist, and violent practices that remain, despite the perception that there is gender equality.

¹ But more research is necessary.

This phenomenon is not exclusive to the United States, and of course, it is not exclusive to these industries. Women politicians and human rights defenders throughout the world have also faced these types of attacks, also with the veiled –and sometimes not so veiled– comments that assume politics as a place for men². It is worth remembering here, that the development of modern politics and modern democracy, was possible, as feminist theorists have noticed, due to the division of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ sphere, and the confinement of women to the latter (Pateman 1989). These attacks seek to return women to their ‘rightful’ place.

These attacks on women in the public sphere can also be thought of as backlash, as they are occurring concurrently with other actions that affect women’s rights. Conservative groups in the U.S. have attacked women’s reproductive rights. In Brazil, the recent impeachment (some have called it a coup) of the only woman president of the country, Dilma Rousseff, was not an isolated event: it occurred after conservative congressmen also closed the Ministry of Women and forbade the discussion of ‘gender ideology’ –that is the inclusion of gender studies– in schools (Biroli 2016). After overthrowing her, the new government’s cabinet was the first one without a woman or members of racialized groups since the return to democracy. Similar attempts have been done in Colombia, Peru, Mexico, and several other Latin American countries, where conservative groups have pushed, not only against women’s rights but also against LGBTQI rights.

These actions have been called by different names: gender electoral violence, political violence and harassment against women, and violence against women in politics –VAWIP for short (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2016). Violence refers more specifically to the *actions* that ‘backlash actors’ take against women politicians. The *purpose* is forcing them out of office or of a political campaign using intimidation, harassment, persecution, humiliation, and attacks on their bodies, and it is motivated by their gender. These actions seek to reinforce the idea that the public sphere ‘belongs’ to men.

Following the lead of feminist works on Violence against Women, I advocate for the use of the word ‘violence’ in a broad sense, because it allows us to understand this as a *systematic* and *structural* phenomenon, that manifest in a wide range of behaviors, going from symbolic attacks online and in traditional media to economic control, psychological abuse, rape and death threats, sexual harassment, physical violence, and even kidnapping, rape, and assassination.

² In Mexico, for example, the mayoral candidate who lost to Rosa Perez in the small town of Chenalho used his political influence to attack her and rally a mob against her. He argued that she had not fulfilled her campaigned promises, but also that ‘women do not belong here’ Gómez (2016)

The use of the word ‘violence’ –instead of simple resistance and opposition, which suggests that these actions are mild- is adequate because it better captures the wide range of behaviors, their escalating nature, and the systematic way in which they are performed. One of the most emblematic cases of VAWIP in Latin America is that of Juana Quispe. Ms. Quispe had for years endured insults and harassment while mayor and councilor in her town. She also suffered from economic violence and had been chased and beaten by a group of people in her town plaza. She was assassinated in 2012 (Corz 2012; Pando 2016). Her case triggered the approval of Law 243 in Bolivia –the only law in the world that recognizes VAWIP. Although this law separates between ‘harassment’ and ‘violence’ as if they were different phenomena, activists and politicians there agree that all these actions are violence. Although one can argue that insults and destruction of property are not violence, it is clear that the attacks against her had been escalating, resulting in her death. This is the nature of VAWIP: it is rooted, as all forms of violence against women, in the belief that men have a right to control women. In this sense, even seemingly mild actions such as name-calling have the effect of reinforcing structural violence (Galtung and Fischer 2013; Weigert 2010).

Methods

The second challenge to the study of VAWIP is that of the methods used in order to measure this phenomenon. Although Political Science tends to focus on quantitative analysis that allows making generalizations, my research on VAWIP in Latin America has highlighted the importance of using in-depth case analysis and qualitative methods to understand this phenomenon. First, counting cases of attacks on politicians and making a sex differentiation does not give us an adequate picture of this phenomenon. Most political actors are still men, which will highlight that men are victims of violence in politics –not really a novel finding. Although all forms of violence are despicable and should be condemned, violence has not deterred men from entering politics and it does not affect the representation of men’s interests. Moreover, symbolic and economic attacks on men do not have the same *social* effects they have on women. These issues are not captured by counting cases.

Second, women may be reluctant to report these attacks or those attacks may not be counted as violence. A woman activists in Bolivia explained in an interview, that reporting a case of VAWIP is ‘political suicide’. Other studies have found that women are more likely to be victims of psychological violence which in turn is less likely to be reported by the media and other sources (Bardall 2011). This same problem presents when the attacks are symbolic or economic in nature as these types are not unanimously accepted as violence. Moreover, as studies on sexual harassment in the workplace have found, men and women have different opinions regarding what constitutes ‘sexual harassment’. Any study on VAWIP needs to take

into account these issues, and be centered on women's voices and experiences while looking at the context and the cases more in depth in order to fully understand what VAWIP is.

Finally, we also need to look at the effects of these attacks more broadly. Even if a woman does not perceive these actions as violence, but as 'the cost of doing politics', they do send the message that politics is an unwelcoming place to women. This has the effect of reducing women's interest in a political career (Krook and Restrepo Sanin 2014). This issue should not be taken lightly as it 1) is the goal set up by backlash actors who use coercive power to try to maintain their privilege and the status quo, 2) further undermines gender equality goals, and 3) affects democratic institutions.

Context

The final issue regarding VAWIP is that of the role of contexts. As I mentioned previously, backlash needs to be contextually understood. Thus, national contexts and cultural differences play a crucial role, not only in the topics and issues that may trigger a backlash against women politicians but also in the manifestations.

An important contextual factor is that of state capacity. In Latin America, for example, several cases of VAWIP have ended in murder and the perpetrators have not been sanctioned. This is a consequence of the lack of institutional capacity in the region (Piscopo 2016). It also derives from a culture that still values men more than it values women, which in turn reflects in how selectively the law is enforced (Menjívar and Walsh 2016).

In developed democracies, it is harder to get away with murder. However, perpetrators still have cultural and symbolic resources available to curtail women's access to political office. One strategy is the use of 'freedom of speech' laws and the value it has on these societies, as a shield to attack women. These actions do not have the social penalty that a physical attack would have but have the same effect (DeKeseredy 2011). In industrialized countries ease of access to social media, but also the political need of having an online presence, make women vulnerable to these attacks. Even when women receive death and rape threats, or intimate images of them are disseminated, tech companies, police bodies, and other institutions, fail to protect the victim and persecute the perpetrators arguing that it is protected speech.

The context also influences the measures adopted and the effectiveness of said measures. In Latin America, besides the Bolivian law, several other legislative proposals are currently being advanced. However, even if these measures are approved, they are very likely to fail in the goal of ending VAWIP as states in the region do not have the capacity to enforce them, and judges and police bodies, along with

other actors do not have the political will to protect women. Despite the ineffectiveness of these measures, the recognition of VAWIP as a crime has important symbolic effects and give women who are attacked tools to act –if they decide to do so. These measures also help make the problem visible. Other strategies advanced by the civil society may also be used, and could potentially be very effective. For example, in Bolivia, women’s organizations launched the campaign “Machista Fuera de la Lista” or “*machistas* out of the list” to protest against the inclusion of candidates who had been convicted of violence against women. This campaign forced political parties to remove several candidates from their lists (Azcuí 2014). A similar campaign could be used for cases of VAWIP.

There are some other issues that are worth discussing in regards to VAWIP that should not go without mentioning. It is fundamental to understand how gender backlash and Violence against Women in Politics affects women of color, LGBTIQ people, women from religious minorities, and other contextually-specific intersectional categories (Townsend-Bell 2010). In this regard, the backlash against women is not an isolated issue but may be framed in terms of a backlash against progressive ideas that promote gender and racial inequality and human rights, however, it is still necessary to understand how these larger backlash affects women.

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