Online Harrassment and Violence Against Women in Elections:
How Do Online Threats of Violence Impact Women's Electoral Participation?

A report released by the United Nations Broadband Commission called violence against women online a "problem of pandemic proportion." The report found that 73 percent of women online have been exposed to or experienced some type of online violence. Among the 86 countries included in the survey for the report, only 26 percent of law enforcement agencies had taken action against such violence. A 2018 Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on *online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective* found that women are targeted in 90 percent of cases where intimate images are shared without consent.

Women voters, candidates, activists, elected representatives and electoral management officials have faced online harassment, threats and other abusing and degrading behaviors. Online harassment and violence against women in elections is an especially damaging violation of internet freedom that undermines democracy. It silences women's voices and prevents them from exercising their civic and political rights. Such abuse and harassment are particularly challenging for women living in conflict or in political transition contexts who may face additional challenges and for those who identify with multiple marginalized groups, like women with disabilities, who may face a heightened risk of online violence that undermines their political rights.

Documenting and creating accountability for online threats and intimidation sends a strong message that all forms of violence against women in elections are unacceptable. One of the challenges of researching and measuring online violence against women is the difficulty in documenting when it occurs. Online violence is rarely recognized as "real" violence, which causes resistance and even open disdain for survivors who seek to report their experiences. Indeed, criminal statutes may not cover it, and a complainant might be only be able to report it to her political party or electoral commission.

As elaborated upon in the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' (IFES) *Violence Against Women in Elections: A Framework for Assessment, Monitoring and Response*, there is a dearth of information and data on this emergent and critical issue, which the democracy and governance community must understand and respond to. This project is an important step in closing the data gap for online violence, leading to recommendations for informed strategies to combat it and to recommendations that aim to empower survivors to self-report and inform medical, legal and security providers.

Understanding and Documenting Online Harassment and Violence Against Women

In September 2019, IFES released the *Violence Against Women in Elections Online: A Social Media Analysis Tool*. The tool offers an adaptable method to measure the gendered aspects and understand the drivers of online election violence against women.

The Violence Against Women in Elections Online (VAWE-Online) Tool identifies trends and patterns of online violence around electoral periods. More specifically, the tool allows users to identify the scope, breadth and intensity of online violence against women throughout the electoral cycle. Using social media data mining software, the VAWE-Online Tool categorizes social media data to identify and distinguish forms of online violence. By incorporating this analysis of online violence into broader analysis of gender in elections, electoral stakeholders can better understand this issue in their respective countries and begin to address it through their work.

IFES developed global search criteria using keywords, phrases and hashtags related to general electoral processes, election violence, violence against women, female candidates and women's participation in politics. The tool includes guidelines for how to adapt to specific local contexts, particularly language, local dialects and slang.

The VAWE-Online Tool includes information on using the data to present recommendations to individuals and gender and electoral stakeholders on responding to, mitigating and preventing online harassment and violence based on the results of the social media analysis. These recommendations focus on survivor support, legal reform and monitoring and mitigation tactics to reduce and prevent online violence.

This tool is intended for use by civil society organizations, election and human rights monitors and observers, and other activist and research groups seeking to analyze online violence against women in elections. It is constructed as a step-by-step tool to introduce users to social media analysis, specifically data mining and sentiment analysis. Although this tool provides an introduction and overview for general users, data mining and sentiment analysis are sophisticated research approaches and users will find it helpful to work with a team with both extensive experience in data analytics and a strong background in working on gender-based violence and electoral politics.

Pilot Studies

Sri Lanka

During the local elections in 2018, IFES partnered with a Sri Lankan research firm to conduct a pilot social media analysis study, looking at online hate speech and violence against women in English, Tamil and Sinhala.

Zimbabwe

Ahead of the historic 2018 elections, IFES' *Violence Against Women in Zimbabwe: An IFES Assessment* study examined politically violent online sentiment and discourse using a sample of 213 male and female members of Parliament, the Senate and Cabinet, as well as a variety of political activists and figureheads.

Ukraine

Published in December 2019, Ukraine's assessment of online harassment and violence against women analyzed online content regarding elected officials from both incumbent and opposition parties, political appointees in government, Central Election Commission representatives and journalists on eight different social media platforms.

Pilot studies are currently ongoing in **Afghanistan**, **Bangladesh** and **Libya**.

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