


NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Research Partnerships to Address Violence against Women in Politics: Unpacking Challenges and Opportunities

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Research on violence against women in politics (VAWIP) has exploded in the last five years. Initially, most of the work in this area was done by local and domestic organizations and by international organizations (Krook 2019; Restrepo Sanín 2022). Today, more and more scholars are researching VAWIP, publishing articles and books on its multiple dimensions, and studying its impact in advanced democracies and democratizing contexts (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2021; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2023; Collier and Raney 2018; Dalton 2021; Freidenberg and Del Valle Pérez 2017; Håkansson 2021; Krook 2022; Kuperberg 2021). This attention is not surprising: the rise of illiberal, populist politicians with profoundly misogynistic, racist, and anti-LGBTQ discourses, and the movements that support them, have made women in politics—as candidates and elected officials, but also as unelected state officials, journalists, women’s and human rights defenders, and voters—highly visible targets and victims of this form of violence (Biroli 2018; Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Corredor 2019; Hawkesworth 2020; Kuperberg 2021; Matfess, Kishi, and Berry 2023; Piscopo and Walsh 2020; Rowley 2020; Townsend-Bell 2020).

In this essay, I focus on potential research partnerships between scholars and practitioners to address this urgent issue. In particular, I outline academic challenges to working on this topic, what collaborations as a (feminist) scholar might look like in practice, and opportunities and challenges of establishing effective partnerships. I base this analysis on my experience studying this problem in Latin America, both as an academic and together with several international and regional organizations, including the Netherlands Institute

for Multiparty Democracy and the Inter-American Commission of Women of the Organization of American States.

Academic Challenges

Probably one of the most significant challenges to researching and understanding VAWIP is the lack of comparable, quality data, both quantitative and qualitative. The first works on VAWIP, published mainly by local-level organizations of women politicians as well as by electoral institutions in Latin America, give us some initial descriptive data about this problem (Krook 2019; Restrepo Sanín 2022). Although they remain fundamental tools for understanding VAWIP, institutions and organizations define the problem differently, are inconsistent in the manifestations accounted for, and use dissimilar levels of analysis, some focusing on the local level, others on national-level legislators, and still others on a mix of different types of offices.

International organizations, especially the National Democratic Institute and UN Women, have developed numerous initiatives to address this gap. However, efforts to create comparable, statistically accurate, replicable, and generalizable data—which is also of concern to academics—often lose sight of the problem. More specifically, behind each data point is a woman whose rights have been violated and whose experience with violence is mediated by other factors like her ethnic or racial identity, whether she is LGBTQ, her socioeconomic status, whether she lives in an urban or rural setting or in a democracy or in an authoritarian regime, and her prior experiences with violence, to name a few. The wealth of experiences of women politicians are not accurately captured by statistical measures (Merry 2016). Further, many dimensions of VAWIP are left out of analyses because they are hard to capture, are very specific to certain contexts, or do not conform to what we understand as “violence.”

This is not to disparage quantitative work. On the contrary, there is excellent research using quantitative data that demonstrates, for example, that women in leadership positions are more likely to be victims of VAWIP (Håkansson 2021), that women mayors in the United States face higher rates of physical and psychological violence than their male counterparts (Herrick et al. 2021), that women are more likely to face sexual violence during elections than men (Bjarnegård 2023; Bjarnegård, Håkansson, and Zetterberg 2022), that women candidates are more likely to report VAWIP and be concerned about their safety, and that violence and harassment against political candidates is increasing (Collignon and Rüdiger 2020). However, these studies do not account for all forms of violence and are limited in their scope. Given these limitations, what more can political scientists do to address violence against women in politics in research and beyond?

Collaboration as Academic Practice

As many scholars have noted, more research is needed to understand the multiple dimensions of VAWIP, as well as how it interacts with and is different from other forms of political violence. It is also vital to consider how VAWIP is amplified by

other forms of structural violence, such as those emerging from white supremacy, heteronormativity, and colonialism. For this research to have an impact, it must be theoretically and normatively driven, multidisciplinary, and easily translated into practical solutions either by civil society or state actors.

One way for political scientists to achieve these goals is to strengthen their collaborations with international institutions, state actors, and civil society organizations. These organizations have impressive expertise in diverse aspects that are relevant for VAWIP research and advocacy, a deep knowledge of different countries' political systems and policy-making processes, important networks and contacts with multiple stakeholders at different levels of government, and technical capacity in multiple disciplines and areas relevant to VAWIP. For example, the Inter-American Commission on Women works closely with the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention, a group of experts from different countries in the Americas who are knowledgeable about gender-based violence, women's rights, and legal implementation. While this expertise is beneficial to academic research, a scholarly perspective can also enhance practitioner frameworks and findings.

Academic-practitioner collaborations can take different forms. The first publications assessing the prevalence of VAWIP and describing the problem were done by civil society organizations (Krook 2019; Restrepo Sanín 2022). These reports remain the most up-to-date source of information about VAWIP. However, academics can provide invaluable support regarding cutting-edge data collection and analysis techniques, participate in the writing of such reports, and provide critical feedback that situates the findings within broader comparative research on representation, democratization, institutional strength, and so on. Academics' focus on conceptual precision, measurement, and validity strengthens the quality of these reports. More rigorous results and analysis are particularly crucial given that the work done by international and regional organizations, as well as civil society actors, has provided important support for legal change in Latin American countries.

Political scientists can also be collaborators with international and regional organizations through training and capacity building. Many academics are expert educators: we train and are evaluated on our capacity to teach complex concepts and ideas in ways that nonexperts (or experts-in-the-making) can easily understand and translate into practical knowledge. This ability can be used to train women (potential) candidates, members of political parties, electoral authorities, and activists. In Latin America, and in most of the Global South, these activities are funded or developed by international and regional organizations, and academics can contribute greatly to strengthening these activities through curriculum development, leading sessions or courses, and evaluating their impact. Academics can also take steps to educate the broader public by sharing their research with broader audiences through outputs such as blogs or podcasts.

Establishing Effective Collaborations

There are, however, important challenges to establishing and maintaining collaborations between academics and practitioners. Some of these are the result

of the different goals of academic research versus those of international, regional, and civil society organizations.

The first challenge is the different timelines that academics and practitioners work on. Academic research, and especially publication, takes a long time. It can be years between the moment a paper is submitted for publication and the moment it is published. Although by the time of publication its results are still theoretically valid, it might seem outdated to practitioners, who require more current information to justify work to funders.

In addition to the problem of slow academic publishing, many times academic results are inaccessible to nonacademic audiences. Lack of accessibility may be in the form of paywalls that are particularly expensive for organizations and policy makers in the Global South. It may also be linguistic. Most academic work is published in English, without translation into other languages, even when the focus of the study is a country or countries where English is not broadly spoken.

Accessibility also refers to how academic papers are written, with careful consideration of the problem, how others have discussed it, how one article fills gaps in the literature, detailed methodological discussions, and the significance of the question and results. This often results in articles that are heavy in the use of jargon and language that is not accessible to most people. Furthermore, these long articles or books are seldom useful for policy makers and activists as they do not explore possible solutions. An anecdote illustrates this point. The first paper that my coauthor and I submitted on VAWIP was rejected from a top disciplinary journal. One of the reviewers dismissively commented that he did not understand a section on “policy solutions” even though the paper discussed a real-life problem with important implications for women’s political representation and a multitude of ideas proposed by civil society and state actors worldwide to solve it.

This anecdote highlights another challenge of building effective collaborations between academics and practitioners: a disconnect between what is considered good academic results versus what are good results for practitioners. An important element of this problem is that while for academics, having results that are statistically significant is fundamental, that significance often has little substantive meaning or practical implications. In other cases, results that are not statistically significant may have important practical implications but are not considered “good enough” in academia.

Others challenges are the results of academic structure, related to the tenure process and metrics capturing the “impact” of the work we do. In most research-intensive universities in the United States, “impact” is typically measured by publications in English-language, peer-reviewed journals in the Global North. These metrics do not capture the influence of our research beyond academia. Yet activities such as blogs, podcasts, participation in experts’ meetings, and events with policy makers, for instance, may have a stronger impact than academic articles and books, which are given greater weight in tenure and promotion processes, even when, in the best scenario, they are only read by a small number of other academics.

Other barriers are institutional. One reason that academic research moves very slowly is that we often face bureaucratic hurdles, including Institutional Review Boards that take a long time to review research projects or are not adequately staffed to address the specific needs and ethical considerations of social science

research; research offices that are more attuned to the needs and realities of STEM and medical research; protocols and policies regarding outside work and conflicts of interests that limit the types of collaboration we can do; as well as multiple teaching and service demands that reduce the time we can allocate for research. Some of these issues are particularly heightened in projects involving international research, especially in the Global South and during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasingly, threats to academic freedom in some U.S. states and beyond are also limiting the topics we can investigate, the types of collaborations we can create and with whom, and even the results we can safely publish (Pettit and Stripling 2022). These hurdles, of course, affect all types of academic research in political science, but can be especially acute for feminist research.

A final set of obstacles in studying VAWIP relates to the nature of the topic itself. Although gender-based violence has been identified as a global pandemic, with one in three women experiencing this form of violence in their lifetime, it remains normalized. This problem is even more acute in politics because the public sphere is perceived as naturally conflictive (Krook 2020). VAWIP is still seen as “the cost of doing politics,” even though it sometimes results in feminicide and always undermines women’s capacity as political actors, silences their voices, and impedes the representation of women’s interests, especially those of marginalized women. This results in inattention to the problem, dismissing it as “niche” or only affecting a small group of privileged women. These accounts ignore that most of the women affected by VAWIP are not national-level legislators but women working at the local level, representing small communities, and promoting profound political and social transformations at the grassroots level. VAWIP is thus not only a problem that some women face but poses a significant threat to gender equality and democracy in democratizing countries as well as consolidated democracies. In a global climate that is increasingly hostile to both gender equality and democracy, addressing VAWIP demands swift, creative, and collaborative work between civil society, international organizations, policy makers, and political scientists.

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