TWP COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Gendered Political Violence in the Digital Sphere in Latin America

A Review

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In her 2024 International IDEA report, *Gendered Political Violence in the Digital Sphere in Latin America* (originally published in Spanish), Marcela Ríos Tobar provides a comprehensive and sobering account of the online abuse, harassment and violence that women in politics face across the region. Despite the gloomy central theme of the report – that women in Latin American politics face an almost daily tidal wave of online violence whose purpose is to silence and disempower them – Ríos Tobar begins with an encouraging reflection. "Globally, and particularly in Latin America, women have managed to break down barriers, compete and take centre stage in the public sphere, as well as to compete for and exercise power in political spaces… They have managed to occupy leadership positions in executive branches, both as presidents and prime ministers, as well as in cabinets and subnational governments, and they have led important autonomous powers in various countries." This is also the case for women in the legislative and judicial branches of government, with growing numbers of women in parliament as well as the courts, among other things.

But despite, or perhaps because of, their widespread ascension to positions of power across the region, women in politics face an almost constant onslaught of violence online. While violence against women in politics is not new, the advent of new technologies (including social media platforms and generative artificial intelligence) has prompted the emergence of novel techniques for committing such violence – and committing it at scale. Ríos Tobar provides a detailed list of some of these techniques, including doxing, sextortion, and slutshaming. But there are others. The Centre of Information Resilience describes a range of further violent techniques that are commonly used to intimidate women in public life, including violent threats, dogpiling, brigading, swatting, and cyberstalking. As technology evolves, so too does the repertoire of violent techniques that women face.

While the specific modes of online violence against women in politics (OVAWP) may vary from country to country, violence itself has become a prominent and poisonous feature of political life for women in countries across Latin America and beyond. Ríos Tobar takes us on an illuminating but unhappy tour of OVAWP in Chile, Ecuador, Argentina, Costa Rica and Honduras. In Chile, for instance, almost 10 percent of messages directed to female and gender non-conforming candidates to the constitutional assembly in early 2021 contained explicit violence. (Though what this statistic conceals is the breadth of these attacks: 67% of female candidates to the constitutional assembly were subjected to online violence.) In Ecuador, there were 876 documented cases of aggressive messages being sent to female political leaders in January 2022 alone (and it is likely that many more went undocumented), while their male counterparts received none during the same period.

In Argentina, both the men and women competing to represent Buenos Aires in the city legislature and the national Chamber of Deputies in 2021 received violent messages on Twitter, but to different degrees. Men received more tweets overall, but a smaller percentage (1.73%) of these were abusive. Women received fewer tweets overall, but a significantly higher proportion of these were abusive (3.55%). This combination of lower overall attention and higher rates of violence illustrates the twin forms of discrimination that women in politics commonly face. The discursive environment they encounter is at once more exclusionary (insofar as it is more difficult for women to be heard) and more violent.

Surprisingly, Ríos Tobar describes "the total incidence" of online violence against candidates in Buenos Aires during this period as "relatively low". But according to the data from the original report by Defensoría del Pueblo which Ríos Tobar cites, women candidates received an average of 8.18 violent tweets every day during the campaign. This level of abuse is actually very significant. If an entire cohort of women political candidates suffered more than 8 violent encounters *in person* every day during an election campaign, we would rightly think of and treat the situation as a crisis. We would recognise not only the magnitude of the effect such intensive forms of violence have on the physical and mental wellbeing of women politicians, but also the damage this violence causes to the integrity of democratic institutions. As Amnesty International has found – and as my own research into the abuse of British parliamentarians echoes – violence at this scale, whether online or in person, causes elected officials to self-censor, to withdraw from regular contact with their constituents, to avoid controversial topics of debate and, in some cases, to decide against standing for certain elected positions (such as committee chairs). It is essential not to fall into the trap of thinking that online violence is necessarily less pernicious than physical violence.

In general, the report makes a valuable contribution to the policy debate by detailing how OVAWP manifests itself in Latin America. It situates the issue within wider political and cultural currents, and it sets out a reasonably comprehensive list of policy recommendations. Indeed, one of the notable strengths of the report is its firm insistence that OVAWP is not a standalone issue but rather one that is rooted in patriarchal norms, in the growing trend towards information disorder, and in broader patterns of violence against women in general.

From a political economy and 'thinking and working politically' perspective, there is much to commend in Ríos Tobar's efforts to root OVAWP in Latin America in these contextual and structural realities. Nevertheless, I felt that more could have been done to uncover, analyse, and understand the proximate *causes* of this violence. In a sense, it is unfair to level this criticism at a report which draws heavily on the existing body of academic and policy research, as this literature itself has tended to be far more descriptive than explanatory. But if we understand only the magnitude of online violence and not its causes, we will find ourselves designing policies and interventions with one eye closed. A deeper analysis of the political economy of OVAWP – of those who perpetrate it, their motivations and their networks, as well as the structural and institutional environment within which they operate – would help to identify more concrete and relevant entry points that democracy practitioners and policymakers can exploit.

Such an analysis should start by asking to what extent this violence is organic as opposed to organised. That is, to what extent is the challenge one of individual keyboard warriors acting alone as they direct violent abuse at public officials, and to what extent is it about organised political actors orchestrating violent campaigns as part of a wider (geo)political strategy? Where online violence is organic, what are the triggers that prompt large numbers of (seemingly disconnected) individuals to post violent messages? In my research into the abuse of British MPs, I have found that the behaviour of political leaders matters: there is a close association between inflammatory rhetoric among elites and the abuse that citizens direct at elected officials online. In other cases, illiberal political leaders actively encourage online abuse against women in politics in a deliberate attempt to silence them. There will be other triggers too, which we need to understand further.

Asking who is committing this violence may seem unproductive. At one level, we already know the answer: it's men. The overwhelming majority of online violence against women in politics (and violence against women in general) is committed by men. But men are almost entirely absent from Ríos Tobar's analysis and recommendations. The report concludes with a set of helpful suggestions for what civil society organisations, political parties, electoral commissions, social media networks, and women politicians themselves can do. But what more do we need to do to change the attitudes, incentives and behaviours of those men who perpetrate violence towards women in politics in the digital sphere? Part of the answer to this has to be research. The vast majority of existing analysis focuses on describing the scale of online violence and/or its effects on women in public life. We now need to shift our attention to the other side of the equation. Which men are conducting this violence, why, and how can we stop them?

Some of Ríos Tobar's recommendations do, indirectly, address this latter question. Stronger internal policies for political parties, more assertive interventions by electoral management bodies, and improvements to social media algorithms would all influence – albeit subtly – the incentive structures that shape online abuse. But we also need a catalogue of interventions that directly target the attitudes and behaviours of men. These might include curriculum reforms, public awareness campaigns that specifically target men, or the mobilisation of networks of influential male allies. Regardless of the form these interventions take, the important thing is that they see the problem for what it is: one of *male* violence against women.

As Ríos Tobar highlights, Latin America has achieved significant progress in improving women's political participation and tackling violence against women in political life. But there is a long way left to go. Men are at the heart of the problem. They must also be at the heart of the solution.

About the author

Tom Kelsey is Programme Manager for Evidence and Learning at the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) where he leads on the production of research and learning products for the Politics and Governance Centre of Expertise. He is keen to explore opportunities to work in Spanish and has therefore written this review in both English and Spanish.

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