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Violence against Women in Politics: Latin America in an Era of Backlash

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In March 2012, Juana Quispe, a councilwoman from a small town in Bolivia, was found murdered in La Paz, the country's largest city. Her death prompted the approval of Law 243, against "Political Harassment and Violence against Women."¹ With this law, Bolivia became the first country to criminalize what practitioners have called "violence against women in politics" (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016a).

Politically active women have faced violence for as long as they have participated in politics in any capacity. Indeed, women demanding the right to vote were force-fed and learned self-defense techniques to ward off the attacks of those who opposed their demands (Williams 2012; Rouse and Slutsky 2014). Activists in Latin America and other regions of the world have documented violence against women in politics since at least the 1990s. Although men in politics also face violence, the violence that women face is distinctive in its form and effects (Bardall 2011). While violence against men

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¹ For the full text of the law in Spanish, see <http://www.diputados.bo/leyes/ley-n%C2%BD-243>.

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has not affected their presence in politics or their ability to advocate on behalf of other men, women politicians have left politics because of these attacks. Violence against women in politics affects gender equality in decision making as well as women's performance when they remain in politics (ACOBOL 2010). Further, men report that violence is much worse for women, both in its nature and its effects (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, forthcoming). Unlike conventional violence against politicians of both sexes, which seeks to obtain policy gains and control (Blume 2017; Daniele and Dipoppa 2017), violence against women in politics occurs regardless of a woman's policy position or ideology, which suggests that the goal is not about particular political outcomes but about maintaining the gendered status quo of politics (Krook and Restrepo Sanín, forthcoming).

Reports of violence against women in politics have become more frequent as women's presence in politics has increased worldwide. According to the database of the Interparliamentary Union's Women in National Parliaments (IPU), the world average for women in national parliaments increased from 11.7 percent in 1997 to 23.8 percent in 2018. In Latin America, the current average is 28 percent (IPU 2019). Concurrently with this increase in women's formal presence in politics, countries in the region have adopted progressive measures such as the legalization of same-sex marriage or civil unions, the recognition of transgender people's rights to change their sex in official documents, the liberalization of reproductive rights in some countries, and affirmative action measures in politics and education to improve the status of ethnic and racial minorities (Corrales 2012; Htun 2016; Blofield and Ewig 2017). These gains have been met with resistance from conservative forces that oppose a more inclusive, less discriminatory political sphere and perceive these changes as threats against "family values" (Corredor 2019). Policy changes like these have resulted in a political climate that is violent against both progressive politics—a backlash—and also against women in politics regardless of the policies they support.

Despite sometimes occurring concurrently, violence against women in politics and backlash against progressive politics are two interrelated but distinct phenomena. Violence against women in politics is used to maintain the status quo of *politics*, while backlash actors are concerned with maintaining a particular *social order* centered on the heterosexual family as the basis of society (Corredor 2019). While women's inclusion in politics is an expression of that changing social order, women politicians are attacked regardless of their ideology, policy position, or political party—by members of the opposition but also by members of their own party. A conservative woman mayor in Colombia was harassed by a regional leader from her own party because she "did not let him manage" her and she did not hire the people he

“suggested” for her administration.² Moreover, backlash against progressive politics is part of a global, organized countermovement intimately connected with religious organizations (Corredor 2019). Violence against women in politics is not an organized phenomenon, even if individual perpetrators have the support of political parties and large numbers of citizens share those views.

Violence against women in politics

Violence against women in politics refers to “behaviors that specifically target women *as women* to leave politics by pressuring them to step down as candidates or resign a particular political office” (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016a, 128). These behaviors include physical attacks as well as other actions that undermine women’s well-being and performance as political actors. Violence against women in politics is a form of political violence, as it helps to maintain political power in the hands of a select group of people—mostly men. As such, unlike most forms of political violence (Valentino 2014), violence against women in politics occurs not only in conflict-ridden societies but across regimes.

Violence against women in politics is also a form of violence against women rooted in unequal power relations between men and women, used to reinforce gender hierarchies. Following the lead of feminist work on violence against women, I use the word “violence” in a broad sense, not only referring to the use of force but also as a systematic and structural phenomenon, manifesting in a wide range of behaviors, from symbolic attacks on- and off-line to economic control; psychological abuse; sexual harassment; and even kidnapping, rape, and assassination.³ In politics, this repertoire of actions is used to force women to resign or to hamper their performance (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016a, 2016b; Restrepo Sanín 2018).

In practice, differentiating between conventional political violence and violence against women in politics is complex. The case of Rosa Pérez, the first woman mayor elected in San Pedro Chenalhó, Mexico, illustrates the intricacies of violence against women in politics. Pérez was elected for the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (Mexico’s Green Party PVEM) in a town where Mexico’s most powerful party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI), had dominated. After her election, her opponent from the PRI and his supporters demanded her resignation, accusing her of “being inefficient” (Jiménez 2016). They threatened her life,

² Confidential interview with Colombian politician, September 2016.

³ See Galtung (1990), Kilpatrick (2004), Stark (2007), and Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016a, forthcoming).

and she was forced to flee. These incidents may seem like cases of conventional political violence between political parties, but a closer look reveals that they are indeed violence against women in politics. First, those who attacked Pérez did not demand the resignation of other members of the PVEM. Further, leaders of her hometown argued that because of customary law, “a woman cannot govern them” (Aparicio 2016). Local leaders in the region used the same argument against other women from different parties, demonstrating a clear pattern of hostility against women politicians, not members of opposition parties, confirming that Ms. Pérez experienced violence against women in politics. This example resonates with research on violence against women in politics, which suggests that women are disproportionately attacked, that the type of violence they face is often gendered, and that the perpetrators are unique to violence against women in politics.⁴

To be sure, women can also be attacked as women *and* because of their policy positions, raising challenging issues for analysts seeking to disaggregate the two. For example, although the number of abusive tweets increased dramatically for all politicians during the Brexit campaign, the level of abuse increased more dramatically for conservative women. Moreover, Diane Abbott, the first Black MP, received half of all the abusive tweets, and Black and Asian women MPs received 35 percent more abuse than white women MPs (Dhrodia 2017; Peck 2017; Gorrell et al. 2018). A recent study of European women parliamentarians found that 85 percent of women had suffered psychological violence, 25 percent had suffered sexual violence, and 17 percent physical violence (IPU 2018).

In Brazil, Marielle Franco, a Black lesbian councilwoman, was murdered while returning from a workshop promoting Black empowerment.⁵ Franco was also a *favelada*, a woman from the slums, who had criticized the government because the police had killed several young Black men in the favelas. Further, other members of her party, including Marcelo Freixo, a white middle-class man, had also criticized the government’s take on security and suffered no violence. Franco’s assassination occurred in a climate particularly hostile to feminist activism: the first woman president of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, was impeached just a year before Franco’s murder. The replacement government installed an all-male, all-white cabinet and reversed progressive public policies adopted during Rousseff’s tenure (Biroli 2016, 2018; Encarnación

⁴ See Bardall (2011), Restrepo Sanín (2016, 2018), Krook (2018), Kuperberg (2018), and Krook and Restrepo Sanín (forthcoming).

⁵ I have not been able to find any reports in which Ms. Franco identified as either lesbian or bisexual. I use the term “lesbian” as it is what her wife used, even though Ms. Franco had prior relationships with both men and women.

2017). Franco's assassination shows not only that differentiating between violence against women in politics and backlash is hard but also that the two phenomena sometimes occur concurrently. Her murder was both an attempt at silencing an inconvenient voice protesting police brutality (backlash) *and* an attempt at silencing the voice of a Black, queer, poor woman defending the rights of those most marginalized (violence against women in politics). In the current political climate in Brazil, and globally, the silencing of marginalized communities cannot be ignored.

Violence against women in politics in the context of backlash

Violence against women in politics has been documented in countries across the world, regardless of the state of women's political participation or the advancement in women's and minorities' rights.⁶ But it is increasingly occurring in a context in which progressive policies are being challenged (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Corredor 2019). However, important differences between the two exist in regard to the perpetrators, their goals, and the forms they take.

The backlash against progressive politics can be framed as part of a global, organized countermovement supported ideologically and financially by the Catholic church and evangelical churches worldwide (Corredor 2019). This countermovement has promoted massive mobilizations against same-sex marriage, "gender ideology," and trans rights (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Corredor 2019). Countermovement actors have also attacked progressive politicians regardless of their gender, although women who promote these policies are more likely to be attacked (Kuperberg 2018). This countermovement backlash aligns with conventional understandings of political violence (Valentino 2014; Blume 2017).

In contrast, research has found that violence against women in politics is multidirectional. Not only are women of all ideological persuasions attacked by their political opponents, but they are also attacked by members of their own party, their colleagues in state institutions, their families, and anonymous citizens both on- and offline, regardless of their policy position or perceived loyalty to the party or party leaders.⁷ Another important difference between violence against women in politics and backlash is that the latter is part of an organized countermovement with substantial funding and a global network of institutions willing to mobilize people (Corredor 2019).

⁶ See Summers (2012), Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016a, forthcoming), Dalton (2017), Krook (2017, 2018), and Schneider and Carroll (forthcoming).

⁷ See ACOBOL (2010), Bardall (2011), Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2016a), Restrepo Sanín (2016, 2018), and Krook (2017).

Although incidents against women politicians may seem to be organized, as in the case of Rosa Pérez, actors targeting a woman rarely coordinate to attack other women, nor do they have connections with perpetrators in other places. Understanding these attacks as a form of violence against women suggests that they emerge from what Erica Townsend-Bell (in this symposium) might call an unreflective desire to discipline and control women.⁸ Violence against women in politics thus occurs even in the absence of backlash against progressive policies.

A final difference is that the goal of violence against women in politics is to maintain the gendered status quo of *politics*. Backlash, instead, is rooted in a desire to maintain a heteronormative and patriarchal *social order*. Violence against women in politics is directed at women's bodies occupying the political sphere regardless of ideology, while backlash is directed at progressive policies regardless of who supports them. This distinction means that conservative women are targets of violence against women in politics. When attacks against progressive women are centered on their bodies and not on their policy positions, it is a case of violence against women in politics. An example from Peru illustrates this point. The first woman mayor of Lima, the capital city of Peru, was constantly harassed by her opponents. This included a recall referendum as well as personal attacks against her promoted by the candidate who lost the election. Although the mayor supported progressive policies, the perpetrators could have used legal means to stop her *policies*. Instead, she had over two hundred legal processes against *her* for alleged corruption and was called in front of Congress over eighty times—her predecessor was called eight times. After over five years, she has not been found guilty. The magnitude of the attacks, their focus on her, and the fact that some of the perpetrators were themselves accused of corruption suggest that, although the attacks may have been motivated in part by her progressive policies, this was also a case of violence against women in politics (Restrepo Sanín 2018).

Violence against women in politics and backlash can be profoundly inter-related: women's presence in the public sphere is per se an affront to so-called traditional family values and to the distinction between public and private defended by backlash actors. However, given that violence against women in politics can occur even in the absence of backlash, policies created to curtail backlash may not curtail violence against women in politics. Ending violence against women in politics requires addressing structural and cultural factors that contribute to a hostile environment against women, such

⁸ See also Okin ([1979] 2013), Pateman (1989), Marin and Russo (1999), and DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz (2007).

as beliefs about a “woman’s place” and women’s roles in reproduction and caregiving. Institutional incentives to eliminate this form of violence and provide women who are attacked with effective tools to report it are also required. Ending backlash requires different strategies, as it is rooted in a desire to maintain a particular social order. In this regard, groups that are attacked by backlash actors, including women, racialized minorities, and LGBTQ communities, need to build autonomous social movements able to advance their interests and pressure politicians to protect their rights (Htun and Weldon 2018). As both violence against women in politics and backlash seek to create an exclusionary public sphere, their consequences go beyond individual victims and undermine both feminist goals and democracy. Combating them is imperative in a global context in which threats to gender equality and liberal democracy are increasing.

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