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# No safety in numbers: political representation and political violence targeting women in Kenya

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**ABSTRACT**

Although quotas and other efforts to increase women's political participation can ensure that the descriptive representation of women changes dramatically over a short period of time, it is not clear that social norms and political interests can shift as quickly as the distribution of legislative seats. Rather than being interpreted as a move toward a more pluralistic and representative form of government, the increased number of women in office may represent a threat to those who benefit from the status quo, and their resistance to losing their privilege may manifest in myriad forms of discrimination and violence. The relationship between political violence targeting women and increasing numbers of women in politics is often overlooked, despite the recognized potential for "backlash" against women's empowerment initiatives. This article leverages data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) to explore the impact of increasing numbers of women in government on violence targeting women in Kenya. The findings show that rates of political violence targeting women have risen in tandem with the share of seats held by women in the lower chamber. That increasing women's representation in political office may result in violent backlash against women generally should prompt greater attention from policymakers and academics to patriarchal resistance to women's advancement.

**KEYWORDS** Election violence; gender quotas; political violence; women's representation; backlash

## Introduction

In 2007, Flora Igoki Terah, then a candidate running to serve as a representative of North Imenti in Kenya, was beaten and forced to eat human feces by a group of three men who warned her to stay out of politics (*Daily Nation* 2007). Terah persevered, despite the threats against her, but lost her race – in part because of the time she spent hospitalized and unable to campaign (Muchui 2017). Although a record number of women were elected in Kenya's 2013 and

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2017 elections following the adoption of a "gender rule" to advance women's political representation, Terah was not among them. In 2009, she left Kenya to study women's rights on a scholarship in Canada, where she remains a committed activist (Muchui 2017). Although Terah's story is gut wrenching, she is far from alone; many women around the world have faced violence for acting on their political ambitions or engaging in politics generally.

In recent years, there has been an effort, by both academics and policymakers, to understand the nature of political violence targeting women. Such work builds on recognition of the potential for "backlash" against women's empowerment initiatives generally (Krook 2015; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016; Restrepo Sanín 2020, 2022). Reactionary attempts to reassert the status quo distribution of political power (or backlash) shape the nature of the political violence that all women (even those who are not running for office or participating in traditional definitions of "politics") face on a daily basis. The possibility that attempts to advance women's interests in one arena may increase their vulnerability in other ways must be taken seriously. Previous studies of backlash against women have focused on the relationship between women's empowerment (often proxied by women's labor force participation) and intimate partner violence (Ericsson 2019; Guarnieri and Rainer 2018; Koenig et al. 2003). We contribute to this burgeoning literature on backlash dynamics by examining how a different measure of women's empowerment – their share of parliamentary seats in the lower chamber – may impact the violence that they face in the public sphere. This study deepens our understanding of backlash by examining the relationship between women's political representation and the level of political violence targeting women in Kenya.

In this article, we leverage quantitative data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010) on public, physical violence targeting women (Kishi 2021a) and qualitative accounts of the violence that women face, to explore the impact of increasing rates of women in government on political violence targeting women in Kenya. The need to understand this relationship is particularly acute, given that women frequently cite fear of violence as a reason for avoiding engagement with politics (The Carter Center 2018). Qualitative investigations of this relationship have underscored the need for broader, more systematic research examining these trends over time (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2021; Bouka, Berry, and Kamuru 2019). These studies motivate our endeavor to quantitatively capture trends in the violence that women face as a result of their participation in political processes. In this article, we consider a narrow subset of the violence that women can face (public, physical, political violence) while examining the experiences of a broad swath of women (including those who are and are not traditionally considered "part of politics").[1]

Our primary finding is that there is a statistically significant relationship between the rate of political violence targeting women and the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in the lower chamber in Kenya between 1997 and 2019, both of which have risen over the years. This relationship holds even when accounting for changes in the country's gross domestic product (GDP), quality of democracy, ethnic group composition, and the rate of violence targeting civilians generally, among other factors. We find that while violence targeting women in politics, such as candidates or voters, might be heightened during election periods (Kishi 2021b), election years are not associated with a statistically significant increase in political violence targeting women in general. This underscores the fact that *political violence targeting women* in general is a quotidian experience (Kishi, Pavlik, and Matfess 2019) that extends beyond the immediate election period. Just as the political process does not end once the votes are tallied, so too do violent efforts to reassert the gendered status quo remain relevant in non-election years. Through a mixed-methods study of Kenyan politics, this article investigates the worrisome relationship between the increases in women's descriptive representation and the increasing levels of political violence targeting women generally – including non-elite women whose victimization does not drive headlines.

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings in this article suggest that backlash against women's empowerment in the United States, characterized by Faludi as "a pre-emptive strike that stops women long before they reach the finishing line," is actually a persistent phenomenon at play elsewhere around the world (Faludi 1992, 14). This finding contributes to the academic discussion of backlash by suggesting that violence and resistance to gender equality manifest against women generally, in addition to violence specifically targeting visible or powerful women (Berry 2017; Piscopo and Walsh 2020; Restrepo Sanín 2020). Here, we define backlash as a reinvigorated attempt to retain the status quo in the face of a credible challenge.[2] Our discussion aims not only to contribute to feminist literatures on gender and political violence, but also to compel policymakers to ensure that women's presence in the political arena does not put them at increased risk of violence. Interventions designed to increase women's representation in political office must pair initiatives to politically empower women with programs to keep politically active women safe and mitigate violent backlash by challenging patriarchal domination and violence in all forms. This would help to encourage the brokering of new political arrangements, rather than the use of violence.

## Women's political inclusion (and the lack thereof)

Although women's participation in politics has risen steadily in recent decades, women remain significantly underrepresented in governments worldwide, holding roughly one-quarter of all seats in single-chamber or

lower-house parliaments around the globe (IPU 2020a).[3] This has spurred a variety of initiatives to increase women's presence and participation in politics. The merits of women legislators for the adoption of pro-women policy (Celis 2007; Tremblay 1998) and the possibility that women legislators will serve as scaffolding for existing oppressive systems (Ahmed 2017; Berry 2018; Berry and Lake 2021; Brown 2000; Burnet 2008; Donno and Kreft 2018; Valdini 2019) have been thoroughly examined. Yet, the effect of increases in women's political representation on the well-being and security of women in their everyday lives is unclear (Hudson et al. 2012). In particular, the relationship between women's representation in political office and the degree of violence that they face remains underexplored.

Until recently, the subfields of social science literature on political or electoral violence and women's political leadership have intersected infrequently. Scholars of political violence consider violence to be related to factors such as strategic incentives (De Waal 2009; Raleigh 2016; Raleigh and Kishi 2020), control over territory (Kalyvas 2006), economic stability (Besley and Persson 2011), or access to resources (Ross 2004). Such violence is often characterized by appeals to in-group identities (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010; Horowitz 1985). In contrast, research on women in politics has historically focused more generally on the barriers to and enablers of women's political inclusion. This research has found that intrastate conflict (Hughes 2009), gender quotas (Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015), international influence (Bush 2011), and the electoral incentives of political parties (Teele 2018; Valdini 2019) are all associated with increases in women's political inclusion. This article considers the relationship between women's representation in politics and political violence targeting women. We contribute to the literature examining each of these phenomena independently and hypothesize about the relationship between them.

Much of the work examining violence targeting women and women's political participation has furthered the concept of "violence against women in politics" (see Krook 2020). This nascent field has identified troublingly high levels of violence against women politicians (defined as both physical and non-physical forms of violence) (IPU 2016, 2021; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). Academics have situated violence against women in politics within the study of political violence more broadly (Biroli 2018; Herrick et al. 2019; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016; Kuperberg 2018). These efforts have demonstrated that male and female politicians face different types of violence; in particular, female candidates are often subjected to sexual and psychological forms of violence (Bardall 2011), and prominent positions are associated with more violence against women (Håkansson 2021).

The literature identifies a handful of relevant factors that shape how violent backlash may manifest. One such factor relates to the nature of women's empowerment. Much of the recent work on backlash has focused

on the relationship between female labor force participation and domestic violence. These studies have found that, contrary to the expectations of the household bargaining model, women's earning potential often provokes violence and resistance from men at home (Alemu, van Kempen, and Ruben 2018; Ericsson 2019; Guarnieri and Rainer 2018; Koenig et al. 2003). Women's increased prominence in the political and social spheres, not just in the labor force, can also provoke backlash (Faludi 1992), although some use other terms to describe similar phenomena (Krook 2016).

We focus on how women's gains in political representation can represent a challenge to the status quo distribution of power, precipitating backlash. Those whose status, access to power, and political interests are threatened by women's mobilization have sought to disempower these women or stymie their progress through various tactics, ranging from denial to violence (Flood, Dragiewicz, and Pease 2020; Krook 2016). In several instances, women politicians have been marginalized or manipulated to entrench the power of the incumbent. There is evidence of backlash against women's empowerment generally (Faludi 1992; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016), and following women's political empowerment subsequent to a quota to increase their participation in politics specifically (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2021; Burnet 2011). This article contributes to the study of backlash by considering how such violence can manifest against women in the public sphere, even when they are not engaging in explicitly political activities.

Another relevant factor is the nature of the political system itself. The degree of democracy may mediate whether the presence of women in politics provokes backlash. A review of backlash against women's empowerment in several European countries found that "countries with a longer and uninterrupted history of democratic governance, a strong women's movement, and … traditions of civil organizing" are better equipped to mitigate backlash against women's empowerment than those with "weaker democratic roots and legacies [and] a younger women's movement" (Juhasz and Pap 2018, 9). In many ways, political violence targeting women reflects women's vulnerability in countries where democratic institutions are newly or insecurely established. Omotola (2010, 70) notes that electoral violence dampens political competition, since violence ensures that "only those with adequate coercive cover became main players." In addition, a study of femicide in Turkey found that women's advances in access to education and legal rights are met with more resistance in less economically developed areas. This suggests that the structural characteristics of the political economy play a role in determining the degree of violent resistance to women's advancement (Kavakli 2020). Despite these studies, a shortcoming of many of the approaches to understanding both violence against women and backlash is that the predominant violence against women in politics analytical lens "isolates gender from the broader contexts of conflict and strife central to the study of political violence" (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020, 922).

Recent literature and programming on violence against women in politics has broadened the focus of this literature to include voters and activists (Krook 2020; NDI 2018). This reflects the long-standing feminist argument that the political realm is much wider than electoral politics, encompassing everyday activities and experiences (Amponsah and Boateng 2021; Hanson 1992; Orloff 1996; Ray and Korteweg 1999). This article furthers the recent turn in the understanding of violence against women in politics by considering the manner in which violent backlash against women's political empowerment can impact all women in the public sphere, not just those engaging in explicitly political issues or activities.

We assert that backlash need not specifically target women running for or holding office to be a powerful reassertion of gendered hierarchies. Political violence targeting women generally can be a means by which those threatened by women's participation in politics reject progressive developments and reassert their dominance. A study of gender relations in Uganda quoted a woman who stated that "if women became equal to men, there will be violence against women by men because men will not allow women to command them as they now do" (Wyrod 2008, 812). Relatedly, even when violence targets highly visible women, it can have a chilling effect on other women's perceptions of safety and interest in politics (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020).

Our purposefully broad approach to the potential victims of such violence – considering any political violence targeting women in public to be a potential form of gendered backlash – allows us to take an inclusive approach to the notion of political participation, moving beyond activity only during election periods or that which is a part of a formal political campaign. Such an approach also allows us to consider the multifaceted nature of backlash and unpack the many forms that this phenomenon can take. Our goal is to assess empirically an assumption in much of the advocacy on gender equality: that increasing women's participation in politics will bring about improvements in all measures of women's well-being. Our analysis suggests that as women gain formal positions of power in the legislature, women in general are subjected more broadly to increasing rates of gendered public violence. This is not to suggest that improving women's representation in politics is not an essential and worthy endeavor, but rather that it is one that comes with its own risks that merit consideration. Advancing women's participation in politics should not come at the expense of women's safety; programs to advance women's representation must consider how backlash may emerge in response to changes in the political status quo.

## The Kenyan context

Since its implementation during the 2013 elections, Kenya's gender rule has substantially increased the number of women in politics in the country.

Beyond the requirement that no one gender can hold more than two-thirds of the seats in any governing body, women were further guaranteed political representation through Women's Representative posts that allocate each county a Women's Representative in the national legislature. Despite steady gains, women's representation in the Kenyan legislature still falls far short of the one-third required by the Constitution.[4]

This lack of compliance with the gender rule reflects the debate and controversy surrounding the quota since its inception. Although the rule stipulates a minimum requirement that one-third of the seats in all legislative bodies should be held by women, enforcement mechanisms are lacking at the national level. Furthermore, attempts to create such mechanisms have been repeatedly blocked by male political elites. In 2018, for example, voting on a bill to reserve one-third of the seats in the legislature for women was denied because not enough representatives showed up to produce a quorum (Bhalla 2018). In September 2020, this lack of compliance resulted in Kenya's Chief Justice recommending that the Parliament be dissolved and reconstituted (Bhalla 2020).

The county assemblies have fared better in terms of compliance because they have a "top-off" mechanism that allows women to be appointed to seats when they do not secure one-third of the elected positions. The need for the appointment mechanism became clear in 2013, when a mere 82 women were elected to the 1,450 open county assembly seats. In the 2017 elections, this number rose to 88 women (IEBC 2020). After the top-off mechanism was invoked, hundreds of women were appointed to the county assemblies, bringing most of them into compliance with the gender rule.

Beyond the gender rule, many factors shape women's ability to participate in the political process in Kenya. Research has documented the persistent barriers that dissuade many women from launching political careers, reduce women candidates' chances of success, and undermine their power once in office (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2021; Nzomo 2015; Tripp 2016). These barriers include the opaque and patriarchal nature of political parties, which often make it difficult for women to finance their campaigns, as well as social attitudes that see women as less capable political actors (Bouka, Berry, and Kamuru 2019; Kivoi 2014; Ohman and Lintari 2015; Okoosi-Simbine and Obi 2021; Ramtohul 2021). Underscoring all of these challenges is the persistence of violence within the political system. Although the 2013 and 2017 elections saw much lower levels of general electoral violence than the 2007 elections, they were still marked by unrest and human rights abuses. Violence surrounding the 2017 elections, for instance, left dozens of people dead (Human Rights Watch 2017). To examine the gendered aspects of this violence, we employ the concept of "political violence targeting women," which is detailed in the following section.

## Understanding political violence targeting women

To understand the relationship between women's political inclusion and women's physical security, we use ACLED's data on political violence targeting women (Kishi 2021a; Raleigh et al. 2010). ACLED offers data capturing political violence, which are coded as daily, georeferenced, actor-specific occurrences, and the methodology for collecting this data does not use a fatality-based threshold for inclusion. Political violence is defined as "the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation" (ACLED 2021a, 7).

ACLED defines political violence targeting women as events in which political violence is perpetrated against a single woman, a group of solely women, or a majority-women group. In some unique instances, there may be cases that are categorized as violence targeting women that are not necessarily against a majority-women group, yet it is evident that a woman was the primary target of the attack. For example, if a female politician is targeted and injured alongside her two male aides, this would be categorized as political violence targeting women, as the primary target of the attack is the (woman) politician, despite the group not being majority women (two men and one woman).

This measure gives a conservative indication of the extent of the violence that women face. Unlike other accounts of violence against women, ACLED does not track psychological violence or threats of violence, nor domestic violence or intimate partner violence. The exclusion of these categories is not to suggest that they are not relevant sources of insecurity for women. While they are indeed important types of violence that serve to impede women's political participation and institutionalize women's subordination, they fall outside of ACLED's research mandate, as well as the scope of this article. In this way, political violence targeting women here is distinct from violence against women or violence against women in politics, as defined by many other organizations that are active in this field and academic assessments of this phenomenon (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020; Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016; NDI 2020).[5]

The definition of political violence targeting women that we use situates this phenomenon in the broader phenomenon of political violence. It builds on ACLED's conceptualization of political violence as something that need not solely target women activists, elected leaders, officials, or voters. Rather, it can target women anywhere in the public sphere, regardless of who they are, whether engaging directly or indirectly in the public political landscape. This definition includes examples such as women being subjected to sexual violence during post-election violence in the Dandora, Kawangware, Kibera, and Mathare slums in Nairobi in 2007. It also includes the murder of Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission official

Caroline Odiga near a market in Nairobi in 2017. Furthermore, and importantly, this violence is not limited to election periods. Examples of events happening outside election years include Kenya African National Union youths attacking a woman opposition Member of Parliament (MP) in Mutomo in 1999 and unknown gunmen killing a lawyer in her home in Kilimani in 2012. Neither politics nor political violence is confined to election years. This is perhaps especially the case when violence is imbued with particular symbolic significance. Our definition of political violence targeting women allows us to capture these instances of violence.

In addition to the fact that this measure does not capture psychological violence, threats, or intimate partner/domestic violence, violence against women is notoriously underreported, rendering our measure of violence targeting women a conservative one. There are cases in which the victim's gender is not reported and cases in which women are not the primary target of attack (including instances in which they are attacked, injured, or killed alongside men), so the event would not be categorized here as political violence targeting women. The definition of political violence targeting women used in this article reflects the difficulty of systematically tracking the full spectrum of violence articulated by feminist academics. Our operationalization of it here is hence a means of providing a hard test of the relationship between women's political inclusion and physical, political violence targeting women.

## Data and methodology

We use data on political violence targeting women in Kenya from 1997 through 2019. This variable is compiled by aggregating data from ACLED on "explosions/remote violence," "violence against civilians," and "mob violence" in which the targets of the violence are women or girls (ACLED 2021b). The frequency of the observations is yearly; ACLED data, which are coded at the daily level, are aggregated to years.

We also use data on the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in single or lower chambers, which come from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) via the World Bank World Development Indicators (IPU 2020a). Figure 1 depicts trends over time related to political violence targeting women as well as the percentage of seats held by women, showing how both have increased in tandem over time, although not linearly. The figure illustrates upticks in political violence events in which women were the primary targets near elections, with marked surges in 2007, 2013, and 2017. There is a positive correlation of 0.512 between the percentage of seats held by women and the total count of political violence events in which women were the primary targets. A similar positive correlation of 0.485 holds when comparing the percentage of seats held by women and the percentage of organized political violence events in which

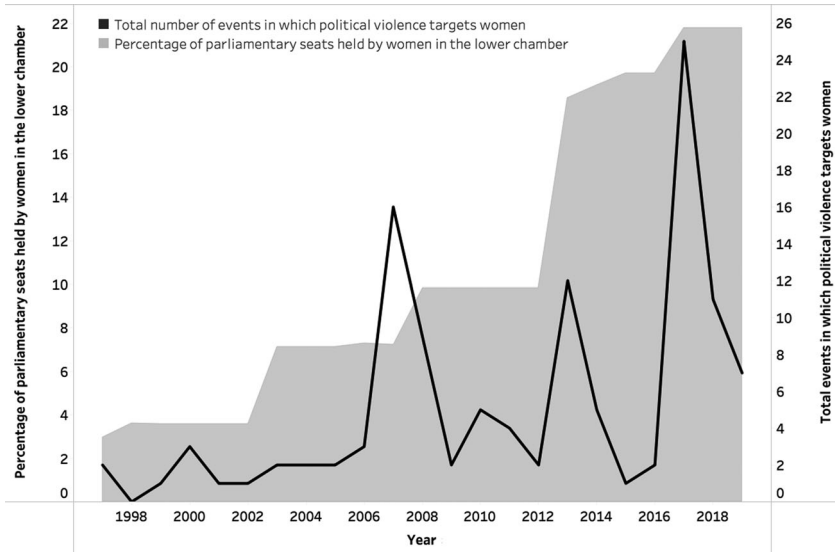


**Figure 1.** Percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in Kenya's lower chamber and political violence targeting women over time.

women were the primary targets, suggesting that the positive correlation is not driven by rising political violence alone.

In addition, we include several control variables. The percentage of the total labor force made up of women, from the International Labour Organization (ILO 2020) via the World Bank World Development Indicators, is included as a measure of economic empowerment in light of the relationship between economic empowerment and violence against women (Eggers Del Campo and Steinert 2020; Jatfors 2017). We include another indicator from the World Bank World Development Indicators, a lagged measure of GDP per capita growth (World Bank and Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development 2020), to account for the negative relationship between GDP per capita growth and violence (Mueller 2016). A regime-type indicator (Polity2) is included from the Polity IV Project (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2017) to control for there being less violence in democracies (Gleditsch and Ruggeri 2010). From the Geo-Referencing Ethnic Power Relations data set (Wucherpfennig et al. 2011), we include a measure of the minority ethnic group population as a fraction of the population comprised of politically relevant ethnic groups,[6] and the number of minority ethnic groups; these measures help to control for the fact that as excluded populations grow, so too may the risk of conflict (Wucherpfennig et al. 2011). We also include a measure of civilian targeting (Raleigh et al. 2010); this variable is compiled by aggregating data from ACLED on "violence against civilians" in addition

to "explosions/remote violence" events that target unarmed civilians. We use this control to ensure that the relationship between increased political violence targeting women and women's representation in government is not driven solely by the fact that civilian targeting tends to rise during election periods, regardless of the gender identity of the victim. We also include a lagged measure of organized political violence (Raleigh et al. 2010); this variable is compiled by aggregating data from ACLED on "battles," "explosions/remote violence," and "violence against civilians," regardless of the victim's gender and regardless of who may have been the perpetrator. This control accounts for the violence landscape in Kenya in the prior year, recognizing that recent trends in political violence in general may impact trends in political violence, including that which targets women, in a given year (Miguel, Satyanath, and Sergenti 2004). Versions of these controls are included in other studies of the link between gender inequality and violence (Caprioli 2005). Lastly, a dummy variable is included to denote whether the year in question is an election year; this is included to control for the fact that violence often rises during contentious periods, such as around elections.

## Results and discussion

A negative binomial regression model is used here as the dependent variable is the number of political violence events targeting women in Kenya. The model tests the effect of women's representation in the National Assembly on the number of political violence events that target women. We find a statistically significant ($p = 0.025$) and positive relationship between the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in the lower chamber and political violence targeting women (see Table 1), suggesting that as the percentage of seats held by women increases, so too does the rate at which women are targeted.

The predicted count of events in which women are targeted by political violence increases as the percentage of seats held by women increases, holding all other variables in the model at their means, during an election year. The predicted number of political violence events targeting women when women hold 7.14 percent of the parliamentary seats in the lower chamber, as they did between 2003 and 2005, for example, is 1.919; this increases to 19.518 when women hold 19.1 percent of the parliamentary seats in the lower chamber, as they did in 2014, for example. Substantively, a one-unit increase in the percentage of parliamentary seats in the lower chamber held by women, holding all other variables constant at their means, is associated with a 21.4 percent increase in the count of events of political violence targeting women. This increase is all the more significant and troubling because a single event can have more than one victim –

**Table 1.** Effect of the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in the lower chamber on political violence targeting women.

| Variable | Estimate |
|---|---|
| Percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in the lower chamber | 0.194** |
| | (0.0867) |
| Percentage of total labor force made up of women | −1.183** |
| | (0.579) |
| GDP per capita growth (lagged) | 0.0789 |
| | (0.0927) |
| Regime type (Polity2 score) | −0.114 |
| | (0.105) |
| Minority ethnic group population as a fraction of the population comprised of politically relevant ethnic groups | 7.982 |
| | (6.379) |
| Number of minority ethnic groups | −0.670 |
| | (0.556) |
| Civilian targeting | 0.00818 |
| | (0.00500) |
| Organized political violence (lagged) | −0.00227 |
| | (0.00244) |
| Election year (dummy) | 0.236 |
| | (0.672) |
| Constant | 56.03** |
| | (27.06) |
| Observations | 22 |

Note: Standard errors are in parenthesis. GDP = gross domestic product. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

ranging from an attack on a single woman politician to a large group of women activists, for example.

Interestingly, the findings in Table 1 suggest a statistically significant ($p = 0.041$) and *negative* relationship between women's involvement in the labor force, a proxy for women's economic empowerment, and political violence targeting women. This suggests that as women's participation in the labor force increases, political violence targeting women decreases, pointing to the role that women's economic empowerment can play in reducing the violence that women face.

There is no statistically significant relationship ($p = 0.725$) between election years and political violence targeting women. While violence targeting *women in politics*, such as candidates or voters, might be heightened during election periods (Kishi 2021b), the backlash against women's representation in political office that all women face, including those outside of direct political processes, is not confined to electoral years; rather, the threats that women in general face are prevalent and persistent over time, even outside the context of an active political campaign.

The findings presented here underline correlation, not causation, and have important limitations. Quantitative data such as those presented above cannot determine the extent to which the relationship between targeting and female political representation is a function of greater female participation in the political process (by attending rallies, working for candidates,

or going to polling stations, for example), whether it is a coordinated and cognizant effort to reduce women's role in the public sphere, or whether it is a spontaneous reaction by those seeking to return to a status quo that they perceive as being more beneficial for them.

Furthermore, while ACLED includes information on the intersectional identities of the targeted women, that information is limited to what has been reported.[7] As such, we cannot determine the extent to which certain types of women (members of certain ethnic, class, religious, or occupational categories) are targeted because of their non-gendered identities or the intersection between them (Rowley 2020). In addition, given the manner in which the ACLED data on political violence targeting women were coded, it is possible that political violence targeting women in earlier years was underreported. Qualitative accounts are critical to contextualize and assess these findings; the following sections consider qualitative data on political violence targeting women in Kenya.

Despite these limitations, we find that the increase in women's political representation is associated with more political violence targeting women generally – a pattern that suggests backlash against women's inclusion in politics in Kenya. The political violence that is leveled at women in public space can be coordinated attacks on specific prominent women, patriarchal resistance to women's involvement in politics in general (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2016), or a means of reaffirming or institutionalizing the existing gendered (and racial) hierarchy (Hawkesworth 2020). This pattern of violence is perhaps best understood as the manifestation of different tactics deployed in response to a challenge to the status quo by those who benefit more from the current gendered distribution of power.

Qualitative accounts of violence and descriptive statistics on the pattern of political violence targeting women in Kenya capture the multifaceted nature of backlash against women's political inclusion. The lived experiences of Kenyan women underline the need to engage critically with how to keep women safe while encouraging their participation in politics. Building on feminist traditions of centering qualitative accounts, we delve in greater detail into the nature of political violence targeting women in Kenya in the following section.

## Qualitative evidence of backlash and political violence targeting women in Kenya

### *Political violence targeting women: which women are targeted and when?*

There are manifold examples of women candidates being targeted by violence in Kenya, which can be found in the ACLED data (event identifiers

(IDs) are noted next to each ACLED citation). For instance, local council aspirant Martha Kibwana was attacked at her home and left for dead in Taveta in 2007 (ACLED, KEN2008); Eunice Wambui, who was campaigning to become the MP for Embakasi South, was beaten with wooden rods by four assailants in Mukuru, Nairobi, in 2017 (ACLED, KEN6265); and a male colleague slammed Kayole South Member of the County Assembly Elizabeth Manyala's head into a desk after becoming enraged that she would not release funds related to women's initiatives for his own purposes (*Star* 2017). Women who are not running for office or voting and not engaging in any political activity directly but who nevertheless play a role in public life are targeted too. In 2013, for example, armed men kidnapped the chair of the commission investigating the Tana River clashes (ACLED, KEN3629).

Violence targets not only prominent women or those running for or holding political office; it also affects women voters, supporters, and participants in the political process more broadly, both directly and indirectly. Women without clear ties to the political system or formal government also face political violence. For example, ACLED records several instances in which attackers sexually assaulted women in poor neighborhoods in the course of post-election violence. Although these women were not actively participating in politics at the time when they were attacked, it is clear that the violence to which they were subjected was fueled by the political landscape. Patel notes that this violence is "political, personal, in the home, the workplace, on the streets, with the reenactment of that violence through media misogyny and messages that murdered women invited it or had it coming" (Nobel Women's Initiative 2018).

Force can also be used, by state security forces as well as non-state groups, to disperse protests featuring women. In addition to tracking political violence targeting women (the ACLED data presented in the previous section), ACLED also tracks demonstrations featuring women (Kishi 2021a). ACLED defines "demonstrations featuring women" as instances in which the demonstrators are entirely or majority women, a women's group, or a demonstration organized around women's rights or specific women's issues. This does not imply that demonstrations that do not feature women hence feature men; this is not a binary distinction (for example, a protest over labor rights might include women alongside men, and it "features" neither men nor women).

ACLED records 53 demonstrations featuring women between 1997 and 2019 in Kenya, over 86 percent of which were peaceful (in other words, there were no reports of protesters engaging in violence or destructive behavior, like vandalism or looting). In comparison, less that 59 percent of demonstrations that do not feature women remain peaceful as such; this trend – that demonstrations featuring women tend to be more peaceful than other demonstrations – is one that can be seen around the world

(Kishi et al. 2019). In over 20 percent of these peaceful demonstrations featuring women, protesters were met with intervention or excessive force, by police or other state and non-state groups. Force directed at protesters includes the alleged use of live fire, tear gas, water cannons, and sexual violence. In a protest at Uhuru Park in 2017, for example, police lobbed tear gas to disperse protesters from the Reto Women Association who were holding a peaceful demonstration after the police killed livestock belonging to pastoralist communities (ACLED, KEN5908). In comparison, peaceful protests that do not feature women see intervention or excessive force less than 10 percent of the time; again, this discrepancy – that demonstrations featuring women are met with intervention and force more often, despite being peaceful more often – mirrors trends seen around the world (Kishi et al. 2019).

### *Who is targeting women?*

Over 71 percent of the political violence that targets women is perpetrated by anonymous or unidentified armed groups or violent mobs. These unnamed groups are responsible for most of the political violence targeting women across all years of ACLED coverage of Kenya, including election years. These events can vary, ranging from assailants targeting political aspirants to violent mobs targeting voters. The prevalence of such violence against women suggests that the backlash that women face can come from a variety of sources and reflects the multitude of ways in which patriarchal violence shapes social and political interactions.

Over 10 percent of the political violence targeting women (not including violence that protesters might endure) is perpetrated by Kenyan police forces. For example, in 1997, Charity Ngilu – a contender in the presidential race from the National Rainbow Coalition, and the first woman contender for the presidency – was injured by a stampede after police tear-gassed a crowd that she was addressing on her campaign trail (ACLED, KEN135). In 2011, it was reported that security personnel mopping up illegal firearms in Tana North District raped women (ACLED, KEN3008). In 2017, police stormed residential estates, where they fired tear gas into homes, beat people, and perpetrated sexual violence against women (ACLED, KEN6595).

Critically, the source of this violence is not always the state, rival political parties, or members of different ethnic or religious communities. Nyabola (2016) notes that moves toward gender equality can cause rifts within families and communities. The multitude of groups responsible for targeting women suggests that the resistance to women's involvement in politics reflects a systemic or structural rejection of that involvement (Krook 2020). Thus, we cannot attribute the resistance to women's political empowerment to a single actor or unified movement; it appears to be

a more structurally embedded rejection of a shift away from the patriarchal status quo.

### *How have women adapted?*

Kenyan women politicians have clearly articulated the threats that they face in seeking office. There was a pervasive sense of insecurity among female candidates ahead of Kenya's 2017 elections. Ninety percent of the women who ran for office in Kenya with whom The Carter Center spoke reported feeling "unsafe during the party primary period, with many sharing stories of intimidation, harassment, and character assassination" (The Carter Center 2018, 18). In addition, many expressed how they felt unsupported by their party (The Carter Center 2018; see also Bouka, Berry, and Kamuru 2019).

Women vying for political office often adopt coping strategies that institutionalize problematic features of Kenyan political life. According to The Carter Center (2018, 30), "approximately 60 percent" of interviewees "pointed to the need to shore up personal security, including hiring 'goons' to ensure their protection." The implications of this pattern for the overall level of political violence in the country are clear: making politics safe for women will improve the quality of governance in the country generally.

## Conclusion

Increasing women's involvement in the political process can change the distribution of power, which can trigger political violence perpetuated by those who want to reassert the patriarchal status quo. The progressive nature of the 2010 changes to the Constitution, which advanced women's rights as part of a broader reform and devolution agenda in Kenya, generated resistance (Domingo et al. 2016; Pike 2020). This article has illustrated how physical violence can be used to reassert the status quo in response to women's political participation. In highlighting the potential for backlash, we do not suggest that efforts to increase women's participation in politics should be abandoned. Instead, we argue that such efforts should be accompanied by efforts to eradicate patriarchal violence generally, broader socialization and civic education efforts, as well as reforms to strengthen the rule of law and make political participation safer for all, both during and outside campaign cycles.

This article has underlined the heterogeneity of the forms and sources of backlash against women's political gains. Whether such violence is intended to serve as a message or warning to women is irrelevant; if such violence discourages women from participating in politics, then it serves the same purpose as intentional backlash. Terah's account suggests that this dynamic is at play, asserting that "acts of violence or threats thereof have, over time, discouraged most women already in politics from mentoring

fellow women who aspire to be politicians" (IPS 2008). The case of Kenya illustrates that women's inclusion in a patriarchal political system is associated with increases in public, physical political violence targeting women – and demands that we rethink our approach to women's political inclusion. Viewing the history of women's political empowerment through rose-colored glasses too often overlooks the crass political interests that often accompany women's participation in politics, as well as the violence faced by women who have entered political life. Merely including women in positions of authority will not radically re-order the conduct of politics and eradicate patriarchal violence (Berry and Lake 2021; Teele 2018; Valdini 2019). Efforts to advance women's inclusion in politics must not only focus on garnering representation in office, but must also ensure that women can participate in politics safely through transforming the nature of the political system away from toxically masculine ways of contesting and consolidating power.

## Notes

1. Krook and Restrepo Sanín (2020) identify a much broader set of the forms of violence that female politicians face.
2. Restrepo Sanín (2020, 303) asserts that "despite sometimes occurring concurrently, violence against women in politics and backlash against progressive politics are two interrelated but distinct phenomena." She argues that violence "is used to maintain the status quo of politics," whereas backlash is "concerned with maintaining a particular social order centered on the heterosexual family as the basis of society."
3. For a full definition of the measure, see IPU (2020b).
4. During the 2017 elections, women won three Senate seats and three governorships for the first time, indicating some encouraging trends.
5. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems understands "violence against women in elections" as manifesting as both physical violence (including sexual violence) as well as non-physical violence, such as online abuse over social media (IFES 2019). Again, "non-physical *violence*" falls outside the definition of political violence targeting women used here.
6. The data set that we are using states: "An ethnic group is considered politically relevant if at least one political organization has claimed to represent its interests at the national level or if its members are subjected to state-led political discrimination" (Vogt et al. 2015, 1329). This means both majority as well as minority ethnic groups, and discriminated as well as state-controlling groups, are included therein.
7. ACLED finds that the gender of victims of political violence is reported more consistently than other types of identities with less physical manifestations on which reporters might rely.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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