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Violence against women in politics as an unintended consequence of democratization

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ABSTRACT

Latin American countries have struggled to improve the quality of democracy after the transition from authoritarian regimes. Countries have adopted various measures, including gender quotas, to make democracies more inclusive. Despite impressive gains in terms of the number of women in electoral politics, the quotas have proved insufficient to level the playing field of politics and promote the representation of women's interests. Women report being the victims of violence and harassment that has the goal of forcing them to resign or controlling their decisions as political actors. This article examines the case of Bolivia to show that violence and harassment against women in politics include both traditional forms of gender-based violence and "novel" ways to attack women facilitated by democratic reforms. The article also analyzes feminist resistance to violence against women in politics in the context of regional campaigns to end gender-based violence. The analysis shows that democratization efforts, including the adoption of symbolic gender equality measures, can have unintended effects that undermine women's political participation and gender equality goals and represent a significant obstacle to the consolidation of democracy.

RESUMEN

Los países latinoamericanos han enfrentado dificultades para mejorar la calidad de la democracia desde el fin de las últimas dictaduras. Los países de la región han adoptado diversas medidas, incluyendo cuotas de género y leyes de paridad, con el propósito de hacer las democracias más incluyentes. A pesar del incremento en el número de mujeres en la política, las cuotas han sido insuficientes para garantizar el acceso a la política en igualdad de condiciones a los hombres, así como para promover la representación de los intereses de las mujeres. Las mujeres políticas también han reportado ser víctimas de acoso y violencia con el fin de obligarlas a renunciar o controlar sus actuaciones como actoras políticas. Este artículo analiza el caso de Bolivia para mostrar que la violencia y el acoso político contra las mujeres incluye manifestaciones tradicionales de la violencia de género, así como otras manifestaciones "nuevas," facilitadas por las reformas democráticas. También analiza las maneras como las feministas han resistido esta forma de violencia en la política y contextualiza estos esfuerzos dentro de las campañas regionales para combatir la violencia de género. Con esto, el artículo

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demuestra que los esfuerzos de democratización, así como la adopción de medidas simbólicas para reducir las brechas de género, pueden tener consecuencias inesperadas que afectan la participación política de las mujeres, la equidad de género, y representan un obstáculo importante para alcanzar la consolidación de las democracias en la región.

KEYWORDS Women in politics; violence; political harassment; Bolivia; democratization

PALABRAS CLAVE Mujeres en política; violencia; acoso político; Bolivia; democratización

No creí que me pudieran pasar semejantes cosas.¹
(I could not believe the things that were happening to me.)

Introduction

Since their transition to democracy in the 1980s, Latin American countries have made efforts to consolidate democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996). These efforts have sought to improve elections by creating opportunities for new political actors, breaking down the power of traditional political leaders, improving electoral institutions, and building more inclusive and representative democracies (Freidenberg and Uribe 2018; Levine and Molina 2011; Mazzuca 2010). Among these measures, countries have adopted gender quotas (Baldez 2007; Bruhn 2003; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Piatti-Crocker, Schmidt, and Araujo 2017; Piscopo 2015b). Governments have also created incentives to increase the number of women in their electoral lists, including the mandatory allocation of a proportion of a party's public budget to women candidates or economic incentives for political parties when women are elected (Piscopo 2015a). In addition to laws to increase women's presence, countries have adopted other measures to improve democracy, including regulations to reduce corruption in public administration, transform candidate selection procedures, make electoral institutions independent, create participatory institutions for decision making at the local level, and regulate the role of the mass media during electoral cycles (Cyr 2015; Freidenberg and Uribe 2018; Mayka 2018).

Arguably, gender quotas are the most effective of all of these measures. In 1997, the regional average proportion of women in national parliaments was 11 percent; the current average is 32 percent. Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua have equal numbers of men and women. In Peru, Costa Rica, Argentina, and Ecuador, over 35 percent of the members of the national legislature are women (IPU 2021). Other political reforms have not been as successful; corruption is still rampant, party systems have collapsed, and some of the institutions established to increase transparency and accountability are

used to undermine democracy or violate citizens' rights (Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo 2019; Mainwaring 2018; Morgan 2011).

Behind this seeming success for women's inclusion lies a troubling reality. As the number of women in politics has increased, women politicians have come forward with stories of violence and harassment. Feminist activists have named this problem "political violence and harassment against women," or "*violencia y acoso político contra las mujeres*." Reports by women's organizations suggest that violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is systemic.² The Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 85.2 percent of women members of parliament around the world have suffered psychological violence, and almost 25 percent have been victims of sexual violence (IPU 2018). The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy in Colombia showed that 63 percent of women in politics have been victims of VAWIP (NIMD 2016). Data from Peru show that 40 percent of women have faced multiple forms of violence during electoral campaigns (JNE 2015). Similarly, data from Bolivia indicate that a majority of women in state assemblies have suffered from harassment and violence as political actors (Quisbert Carvajal and Rossel 2018). These data show that VAWIP is prevalent, but they also highlight some of the problems of studying VAWIP. First, the definition of "women in politics" varies: some studies focus on elected women, some on candidates, and some on national-level offices. Second, these reports center on general pre-established manifestations of VAWIP, such as physical assaults, ignoring the context-specific ways in which women are attacked (Krook and Sanín 2020). Third, although these reports and other academic works argue that VAWIP and gender quotas are linked (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020; Cerva 2014), they do not show how VAWIP is related to other democratic processes or institutions.

This article contributes to the study of VAWIP by addressing the latter two issues. First, through the analysis of testimonies, news reports, and interviews with different political actors, the article shows that manifestations of VAWIP include previously theorized forms of violence against women, such as physical and sexual violence. However, VAWIP is simultaneously carried out via other means, including by abusing and manipulating democratic procedures, language, and institutions to undermine women's work or illegally remove them from elected office. These manifestations of harassment and violence reinforce unequal power relations between men and women in politics and are specific to democratizing contexts. Relatedly, the second contribution of the article is to show that democratic reforms aimed at improving the quality of democracy interact with gender quotas and parity laws in unintended ways.

First, democratic reforms have opened spaces for political struggle, creating tensions between old and new political actors. With the adoption of gender quotas and parity laws, women have been seen as taking positions

that “belong” to men. VAWIP is used to force women out or constrain their actions. Second, the institutions and procedures designed to improve the quality of democracy provide tools with which to attack women. These include formal institutions, such as anti-corruption offices, and more informal institutions, such as the language of democracy, which is used to undermine women as political actors. The abuse of institutional reforms affects women’s work and well-being and efforts to improve the quality of democracy by reinforcing unequal gender relations and maintaining traditional informal practices that keep power in the hands of a few men. This article focuses on the case of Bolivia, the first country to discuss VAWIP and recognize this problem with the approval of Law 243, Against Political Violence and Harassment against Women, in 2012.

The first section situates the argument within the literature on VAWIP and discusses how democratic reforms shape VAWIP. The argument is not that democratization *causes* violence; instead, democratization facilitates the emergence of specific manifestations of violence. The second section explains the methods and case selection, situating Bolivia as a paradigmatic case. The third section analyzes the relationship between democratization and VAWIP in Bolivia. In the fourth section, I examine how women activists and politicians have mobilized to raise awareness about VAWIP and promote legal measures to criminalize this form of violence. I situate this resistance within the regional movement against gender-based violence and the academic discussions of femicide as an expression of states’ failure to recognize women as full citizens. The conclusion analyzes the implications of these findings and outlines areas for future research.

Democratization and violence in Latin America

Latin American countries transitioned from authoritarian regimes to democracies in the late 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1990s, when most of the region was considered democratic, countries have adopted new and more progressive constitutions and passed reforms to strengthen political institutions, increase the quality of elections, and make governments more representative and inclusive (Freidenberg and Uribe 2018; Schilling-Vacaflor 2016). These reforms are simultaneously centered on facilitating access to the presidency by traditional political actors and opening opportunities for new political actors at other levels of government (Freidenberg and Uribe 2018). The reforms include fiscal and administrative decentralization, the professionalization of electoral institutions, and the creation of institutions to oversee public actors, reduce corruption, and improve accountability (Berliner and Erlich 2015; Cyr 2015; Husted 2002; Rosales 2012). Countries have also passed affirmative action measures to increase the participation of women, Indigenous groups, Afrodescendant people, and youth in decision-making

bodies. Currently, all but two countries in the region have adopted gender quotas or parity laws (Archenti and Tula 2017; Franceschet and Piscopo 2013; Gray 2003; Jones 1998; Marx, Borner, and Caminotti 2009; Piatti-Crocker, Schmidt, and Araujo 2017; Piscopo 2015b). Colombia has approved reserved seats for ethnoracial minorities, and Bolivia has reserved seats for Indigenous peoples (Htun 2016).

These reforms have had significant consequences for democratization and women's representation, even if not all of the reforms have had the intended effects. Efforts to decentralize government and create institutions for direct democracy have given citizens a louder voice in the decisions that most directly affect them, opening new opportunities for participation and engagement in politics (Mayka 2018). Governments have become increasingly – though imperfectly – more representative. Although white, upper-class, older, cisgender men still dominate in legislatures, judiciaries, and the presidency, the numbers of women and Indigenous and Afrodescendant people in legislative bodies have increased (Htun 2016; Hughes 2013; IPU 2020). Finally, despite the perception of increasing corruption and high levels of impunity, sanctions have also become more common. Transparency International (2019, 2) found that “[i]n the last five years, momentum has been building against corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean.” Citizens are more aware of the effects of corruption and are demanding that governments act.

Despite the success of gender quotas in increasing the number of women in politics, there are still barriers to women's exercise of power and acceptance of women as political actors. Instead of acknowledging gender equality in politics as a fundamental democratic value, political parties have used a wide variety of strategies to avoid complying with affirmative actions. These have included: changing candidate selection procedures, such as adopting primary elections to select candidates (Baldez 2007; Johnson 2016); placing women at the bottom of electoral lists or in unwinnable districts (Langston and Aparicio 2011); nominating “nonviable” women (those who have no chance of winning, because they are not well known, have no experience in politics, or do not have party support) as “sacrificial lambs” (Gatto and Wylie 2021; Wylie, Santos, and Marcelino 2019); challenging the legality of gender quotas (Piscopo 2015b); feminizing the names of male candidates (Baldez and Brañez 2005); and relegating women to serve as alternates rather than principals (Vidal Correa 2014). In addition to these barriers, activists, politicians, and academics in Latin America have identified violence and harassment against women in politics (Albaine 2013; Archenti and Albaine 2014). Harassment and violence are part of the same battery of actions used by political parties and leaders to avoid complying with gender equality in politics and are thus a barrier to improving democracy.

VAWIP refers to acts of pressure, harassment, and abuse directed against women in politics to force them to resign from office or make decisions against their will (Krook and Sanín 2016). Although policy positions or ideology may influence which or when women are attacked (Kuperberg 2018), VAWIP is a form of gender-based violence in which women are attacked simply for being women (Krook 2020; Krook and Sanín 2016). Krook (2020) explains that while both men and women can be victims of “violence in politics,” and violence may take gender-differentiated forms (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020), VAWIP is a direct attack on the descriptive representation of women. VAWIP does not aim at “suppressing political competition” but “expresses bias and discrimination” and calls “into question the rights of [women] to take part in politics” (Krook 2020, 93). This perspective echoes the conceptualization of VAWIP in Latin America where activists emphasize that this form of violence is an expression of gender inequalities in the public sphere. They recognize that although men also face violence in politics, this specific form of violence is not just about politics as competition for state power, but it is used to maintain men’s dominance in politics. Although gender quotas and parity laws have increased the number of women in decision-making spaces, they have been inadequate for the task of transforming the gender imbalance of politics more broadly, especially in the advancement of substantive issues, such as reproductive rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer + (LGBTQ+) rights, and Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights (Friedman, Rossi, and Tabbush 2020).

VAWIP is not new, but it has become more prominent as more women have entered politics. Despite this, women politicians who are victims of VAWIP frequently express surprise. The opening quote in this article, which translates to “I could not believe the things that were happening to me,” is an example reflected in several interviews. A local councilor from Colombia, for example, told me that although she had training to recognize (gender-based) violence due to her work as a human rights defender, she struggled to identify herself as a victim of VAWIP. Later, as she reflected on what was happening to her – she was insulted by other council members, someone broke her office window, and her opponents and colleagues accused her of having affairs – she realized that these actions were violence. She was adamant that the goal was not to alter her policy positions but to change the dynamic of her electoral campaign so that she would leave the race.³

The use of *acoso* (harassment) in Latin America alongside violence indicates a critical feature of VAWIP. Rather than discrete actions, VAWIP refers to numerous cumulative actions deployed by multiple perpetrators to undermine women’s work as political actors. Although some incidents may result from political differences that are not directly motivated by gender, VAWIP is embedded in a larger context of unequal power relations between men and women in politics and beyond. This understanding of VAWIP is similar

to how Latin American activists have conceptualized feminicide; although the murder of one individual woman may not have been explicitly *because of gender* (that is, femicide), the larger context of violence against women, negligence on the part of the state and its actors, and societal acceptance that facilitates and justifies such murders makes it possible to talk about *feminicide* (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; Lagarde 2008; Segato 2014).⁴ Latin American activists who are working to make VAWIP visible emphasize that women are political actors who have historically been excluded from politics because of their gender through legislation that forbade them from voting and positioned them as dependent on men. This is the historical wrong that gender quotas and parity laws seek to address. Discussing violence and harassment *against women* ignores forms of gender-based violence against gender-nonconforming people and the potential of violence against gay men and lesbians to reproduce heteronormativity in politics. However, especially in Mexico, electoral institutions include members of the LGBTQ+ community within the protections granted by gender equality rules (Valdez and Luis 2018).

The conceptualization of *acoso y violencia política* (political violence and harassment) in Latin America centers women as the potential victims of VAWIP, recognizing that race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, education, rurality, and disability shape the forms and meanings of gender-based violence. Activists also acknowledge that men can be victims of political violence. However, they are emphatic that women political actors – unlike cisgender men – are targeted *because of* their gender, in addition to other motivations for violence, such as policy positions or party affiliation.⁵ Although unacceptable, violence against cis, heterosexual, white men political actors does not threaten the meager gains made to improve gender equality in politics.

Methods and case selection

To understand how VAWIP is related to processes of democratization, I conducted virtual and in-person interviews with women activists, politicians, and members of the state bureaucracy in Bolivia and other countries in Latin America. I carried out the interviews between 2015 and 2020. I supplemented this data with information from more than 100 reports produced by women's organizations and international institutions. These documents work as "found" sources – in other words, sources that were not created "for the purpose of study" and are "noninteractive" (Reinharz and Davidman 1992, 147) – that present a picture of VAWIP as it is understood by activists and politicians in Latin America. To complement the information obtained from these sources, I collected more than 500 news reports on VAWIP to find relevant cases and understand the discussion of the problem. I also

analyzed legislative debates, court sentences, and other judicial records to see how different actors understand VAWIP and its causes, effects, and potential solutions.

Multiple sources allowed me to corroborate the findings via triangulation. This method enables researchers to evaluate the plausibility of their argument by arriving at the same conclusion using different sources of data (Ackerly and True 2020, 174–175). I used feminist content analysis to review the documents, paying attention to what is said, the context in which the materials are produced, and what and who are left out of the discussion (Ackerly and True 2020; Reinharz and Davidman 1992). The texts were analyzed by taking notes of common themes across them, topics prevalent in some but not other reports, and issues hypothesized but absent. I also used the software for qualitative analysis NVivo for coding the documents.

To analyze the relationship between democratization efforts and VAWIP, I explore Bolivia, which is a country that has discussed the problem in depth. This case is paradigmatic because the topic of VAWIP was in the public eye earlier in Bolivia than in any other country in the region, the discussion has occurred alongside a process of political transformation, and Bolivia was the first country in the world to legally recognize “political violence and harassment against women.” Furthermore, the discussion in Bolivia has shaped debates about VAWIP in Latin America more broadly; most bill proposals and interviewees in other countries mention Bolivia’s law and reports.

Although democratization in Latin America is far from homogeneous, some themes and issues are common. Bolivia’s process is similar to others in that the country transitioned from a dictatorship and started a process of democratic consolidation, creating opportunities for new political actors, emphasizing the need for free and fair elections, and promoting the development of a democratic society (Centellas 1999). Further, as have most countries in the region, Bolivia adopted structural adjustment policies, including neoliberal principles and reforms aimed at improving democracy, such as decentralization and anti-corruption measures. The government adopted gender quotas and parity laws, improving the laws over time and adopting parity in decision making (Baldez and Brañez 2005; Zabala 1998). Although there are differences within the region, overall, Bolivia serves as a good case to understand the relationship between democratization and VAWIP.

Gender, violence, and democracy in Bolivia

Immediately after Bolivia’s transition to democracy in 1982, the main political parties adopted an exclusionary strategy, avoiding the demands of social movements (Cyr 2015). This strategy affected women and Indigenous groups in particular as their demands were left out of public policy and they were also informally excluded from political office (Hughes 2013). At

the same time, the neoliberal reforms that were adopted promoted activism by different groups – including Indigenous communities and women – based on their identity (Yashar 2005).

The Constitutional Reform adopted in 1994 led to the creation of several laws to regulate political activities and decentralize the country (Centellas 2015). The Law of Social Organizations (1994) allowed Indigenous and peasant organizations to take part in the administration of public works in their communities, and the Municipalities Law (1999) allowed towns to collect and manage their own resources and create their own municipal plans. These laws sought to make democracy more inclusive, more transparent, and more accessible to local communities. In 1997, the National Assembly approved a gender quota law requiring that at least 30 percent of the people in political parties' congressional lists should be women. Women could be nominated as a *propietaria* (principal) or a *suplente* (alternate). Political parties nominated women as alternates, effectively complying with the quota without including women (Novillo 2011).

In response to rising inequality that generated dramatic social protest and rapid turnover in the presidency, Bolivians elected Evo Morales as President in 2005. Morales, an Indigenous union leader, built a coalition of different actors, including Indigenous organizations, coca growers, and miners, as well as more traditional political groups, with the promise of reforming Bolivia's political system and initiating a "Process of Change" (Anria 2019; Rousseau 2011). Morales convened a Constitutional Assembly in 2006 and Bolivians approved a new Constitution in 2009. This Constitution furthered democratization efforts by, among other things, adopting gender equality, establishing the autonomy of departments and municipalities, and creating independent electoral institutions. The Constitution also adopted seven reserved seats for Indigenous groups (Htun 2016). Despite the work of women activists promoting the inclusion of depatriarchalization – including the promotion of gender equality – as one of the purposes of the state alongside decolonization (Article 9), this goal was not included in the Constitution (Salguero 2008).

With gender quotas, along with the decentralization efforts, the number of women in politics increased, reaching parity in decision making in the National Assembly in 2015 (IPU 2021). Despite the increase in women's descriptive representation, women have faced challenges to their presence. For example, parties have changed the names of men candidates to feminized versions – for example, Juan to Juana – to appear to comply with the quota law (Baldez and Brañez 2005) and used violence and harassment to force women to step down as candidates or once they are elected to office (Krook and Sanín 2016). Women activists in the country have called attention to the need to reach not just descriptive parity but also substantive parity, going beyond including women's bodies to achieve social and cultural transformation (Coordinadora de la Mujer nd; Novillo 2011; Sánchez and Uriona 2014).

Initially, the Association of Female Councilors of Bolivia (Asociación de Concejalas de Bolivia, ACOBOL) – an organization founded by a councilwoman from La Paz who was harassed and illegally suspended so that her alternate could take her seat⁶ – collected cases of VAWIP. The cases gathered by ACOBOL are similar to that of the organization's founder (Machicao 2004). The perpetrators of violence, as shown by diverse reports and interviews, are frequently the alternates, other members of the councils, and mayors, as well as citizens. Political parties also play a key role as they explicitly or tacitly allow candidates to pressure women to abide by pre-electoral agreements in which they "share" their seat with the alternate. The following section analyzes how formal and informal democratic institutions are used to perpetrate VAWIP in Bolivia.

VAWIP and democratic practices

Bolivian women in politics have reported that their colleagues, members of the opposition, regular citizens, and members of their political parties frequently harass them or use violence to force them out of politics or pressure them to make decisions against their will (Rojas Valverde 2010, 2012). Although male political actors also face some forms of violence, as explained earlier, activists in Bolivia recognize VAWIP as a distinct form of political violence to which women are subjected simply for being women and that threatens the gains made in women's descriptive representation (Krook 2020, 20). VAWIP includes behaviors that specifically target women's political activity, such as deliberately giving women false or incorrect information about council meeting times and places; denying women the basic resources needed to do their jobs, such as computers or an office; and constantly asking women to bring coffee or food, make photocopies, or clean, instead of allowing them to participate actively in meetings (Rojas Valverde 2012). The reports analyzed here emphasize that women, but not men, are the targets of these practices.

The reports published by ACOBOL and other organizations, as well as data collected by the electoral authorities, show that acts of VAWIP seldom happen in isolation and frequently escalate into more extreme actions. These actions also occur systematically against the same women, making it impossible for them to do their jobs effectively and affecting their physical and mental well-being. The dramatic and ultimately fatal case of Juana Quispe, a councilor from Ancoraimas, illustrates how harassment and violence are interconnected and how they relate to democracy. The government party, the Movement Toward Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS), invited Quispe to stand as alternate for the council elections. Instead, she decided to run as principal, with the support of a citizens' group. The mayor threatened her with death, she was beaten, and someone threw cement in her face and started rumors

about her personal life “to force her to resign as councilor” (Pando 2016). The mayor and members of the council falsely accused her of corruption because the mayoral candidate from her citizens’ organization had been convicted of corruption. They did not present any evidence of her wrongdoing, nor was she ever investigated or found guilty of misconduct. During the first council session, a group of citizens demanded that she resign, threatened her with physical violence, and prevented her from entering the town hall. The president of the council concealed information about the council meetings, changed the place of the meeting without notice, or closed the doors so that she could not attend. This, in turn, was used against her because, according to the rules of the council, if she missed three sessions, she could be suspended, as eventually happened (Gil 2019). Quispe started legal proceedings to be reinstated as a councilor and was granted constitutional protection. However, the mayor and other councilors disobeyed this ruling and threatened her with death during one of the proceedings. The day that she was killed, she had lunch with the mayor and other people who harassed her, but the police dismissed her case as a mugging (Corz 2012; Gil 2019; Pando 2016). Her case shows how democratic institutions are used to attack women in politics; the rules of the council were used to suspend her, even though it was the council’s actions that hindered her participation, and anti-corruption arguments were used to suspend her mandate, while “the people” – that is, the supporters of the mayor – blocked her participation.

Democratic reforms have facilitated violence and harassment against women politicians in other ways. The creation of new municipalities and the decentralization processes that granted towns the power to manage their own resources opened spaces for political participation and gave political parties new arenas for competition. This openness has presented opportunities for women’s political participation because local-level offices are more accessible, they require fewer economic resources to run for, and they allow women to stay close to their families. In many cases, they represent stepping stones to higher offices (Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Massolo 2006). The elements that facilitate women’s political participation at the local level, such as the Popular Participation Law and the Municipalities Law, increase opportunities for political competition for traditional political actors. However, these laws do not create mechanisms to address power imbalances among men and women, nor do they challenge old practices or beliefs about the public sphere. Neither law, for example, specifically mentions gender equality.

In addition to these laws, efforts to reduce corruption and increase accountability have facilitated attacks against women. As the case of Quispe shows, false accusations of corruption are one of the tools employed to undermine women’s political work. Anti-corruption efforts are used against women in two ways. Women are falsely accused of corruption in traditional media or on social networks, or by opening legal cases against them. Alternatively,

women who start inspecting their town's finances or overseeing the mayor's work – that is, challenging traditional practices and informal agreements associated with male dominance in politics – are harassed (ACOBOL 2010; Restrepo Sanín 2020a).⁷ These types of complaints were prevalent in the interviews and reports analyzed for this article. For example, a former councilwoman from Bolivia explained that the mayor of the city conspired with her alternate so that he could support the mayor in a vote of no confidence, taking advantage of rules to make institutions more democratic. The mayor and the alternate “made up a false accusation of corruption” and illegally suspended the councilor so that the alternate could take her seat.⁸

These practices are justified using “democratic” discourse even when they are illegal. “Concerned citizens” and fellow politicians, for example, file official complaints against “corrupt” women because they allegedly care about transparency, democracy, and accountability. In the case of the aforementioned councilwoman from La Paz, the mayor and the alternate invoked an article from the Municipalities Law to give the councilor time to defend herself from the false accusations, even though it was not relevant for her situation. These actors also use “the will of the people” as an expression of democracy to force women to resign, or mobilize “the people” to pressure women to resign. These references to “the people” are common in cases of VAWIP in the news and reports and represent an appropriation of the language of democracy. “The people” – in Spanish, *el pueblo* – is a vague expression that in practice refers to supporters of a party or politician who are mobilized to justify the expulsion of women. For example, supporters of the mayor blocked the councilwoman from La Paz's entrance to the town hall days before she was suspended. In the case of Quispe, the president of the council argued that he was going to suspend her because “the people did not want her” (Corz 2012). Similarly, in the case of Magda Haase, a councilwoman from the town of Tarvita, citizens pressured her during a public town hall meeting convened by members of the council who wanted her to resign and kidnapped her until she did so. The councilors and the mayor argued that her resignation was valid because “the people” in her town wanted her removed from office (EjuTV 2014). In these instances, the opponent is not claiming to represent “the people”; he is justifying the expulsion of the woman by claiming popular support for his decision. “The people” – the *demos* in democracy – in these cases only refers to those who oppose her, not the voters who elected her or the constituents whom she represents.

Informal institutions and VAWIP

In addition to formal rules, informal practices that are not regulated but are broadly accepted are also used against women. For example, in Bolivia's National Legislature, alternates work for one week of the month instead of

the principal so that the alternates receive payment (Asamblea Legislativa Plurinacional nd). Male alternates use this practice at the subnational level, where it is not regulated, to justify harassment of women principals with the excuse that *alternancia* – the mandatory alternation between male and female candidates in electoral lists – means that the principal and the alternate must share the seat. This has resulted in an uptick in resignations of women – but not men – elected officials about two years after the election, roughly half of the term for which councilors are elected (Restrepo Sanín 2018).

Interviews and analysis of the reports show that these agreements to share the seat are reached via pressure, forcing the woman to sign blank papers and promissory notes according to which she would be in debt if she does not resign (Restrepo Sanín 2018). After the election takes place, the alternate – with the explicit or tacit support of the party – uses harassment and violence to force the woman principal to abide by it.⁹ These actions are so common among women that Bolivia’s Law 243 explicitly forbids resignations that are not done in person, in the office of the Superior Electoral Tribunal in La Paz, and even then only after electoral authorities have conducted an interview with the woman.¹⁰

A final way in which democratic institutions are weaponized against women is related to procedures and institutions created to improve transparency and accountability. The decentralization laws mentioned above explicitly state that the role of councilors is to *fiscalizar* (audit) the work of the mayor. The reports analyzed, as well as the interviews, show that women councilors take this role very seriously, but as soon as they begin to audit the mayor’s conduct, by for example requesting to see spending reports, they are attacked, frequently by being themselves falsely accused of corruption. It might be argued that these attacks are not motivated by their gender but by their political activity; however, the attacks are intended to control women’s behavior in politics and are grounded in gender stereotypes that define women as subservient to men and thus not having the right to question men’s behavior. False accusations of corruption against women are simultaneously judicial/institutional harassment and a form of semiotic violence as the intent and the consequence are to stain women’s image. Finally, these accusations, especially when women are formally investigated by relevant authorities, are a waste of women’s time and other resources and hamper the institutions by burdening already overwhelmed departments, slowing down procedures, and wasting resources, thereby undermining the public’s trust.

Feminist resistance

Women politicians in Bolivia and beyond have used multiple strategies to combat VAWIP. In Bolivia, ACOBOL drafted a bill proposal to criminalize “gender-based political violence and harassment.” The proposal was

discussed in the Bolivian National Assembly between 2004 and 2006 but was not approved. The Constitutional Assembly that was convened in 2006 opened a new opportunity for advancing women's rights. Women organized in the *Movimiento de Mujeres Presentes en la Historia* (Movement of Women Present in History) to present a unified agenda for gender justice. Among their demands were provisions to guarantee parity in decision making and combat violence against women. Afterward, they created a political agenda by and for women that included the main legislative goals of the women's movement. Among these goals was the approval of the bill proposal to criminalize VAWIP (Rousseau 2011; Salguero 2008).¹¹

The VAWIP bill proposal was presented again in 2010, and through coordination between feminist politicians and state officials, it received support from different legislative committees.¹² The murder of Juana Quispe, on March 12, 2012, increased attention to the problem of VAWIP. Activists demanded justice for her and it became increasingly difficult for legislators to deny the impact of political harassment and violence against women.¹³ During the discussion of the bill proposal, activists from different organizations filled the legislative chambers holding pictures of Quispe.¹⁴ Legislators thanked ACOBOL and recognized the women activists in the Chamber (Cámara de Diputados 2012).

Despite the work of women activists and politicians bringing attention to the consequences of VAWIP, male legislators were absent for at least part of the discussion. Deputy Norma Piérola, a member of the opposition to the MAS, said: "I would like it if the men [deputies] were here, and it looks like they have escaped" (Cámara de Diputados 2012, 40–41). This shows the continued resistance not only to the recognition of VAWIP as a serious issue, but to the discussion of bill proposals that specifically address women's interests. Men's absence from these types of discussions has been noted by other authors (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2017; Xydias 2007). Despite the men's absenteeism, the bill proposal was unanimously approved in the Chamber of Deputies and later in the Senate, and signed into law on May 28, 2012.

The Bolivian Law on VAWIP was the first in the world to recognize and criminalize harassment and violence against female politicians. The discussion in the country has had a profound impact throughout the region. Women activists and organizations with the support of international organizations have published research reports on VAWIP in Costa Rica, Peru, El Salvador, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Honduras (Arboleda 2012; Escalante and Mendez 2011; Herrera, Arias, and García 2012; Hevia Rocha and Cabal 2017; NIMD 2016; Quintanilla 2012; Torres García 2017). In Mexico, feminists in electoral institutions have created a protocol to address electoral crimes through a gender lens. Women politicians have proposed legislation similar to Bolivia's in Peru, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Honduras, Paraguay, Argentina, and Ecuador (OEA-CIM, ONU Mujeres, and Albaine 2020; Restrepo Sanín

2021). The Inter-American Commission on Women and the Follow-Up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention have also supported these efforts by organizing meetings with political actors from different countries, as well as publishing a Model Law. Mexico and Peru became the second and third countries to explicitly criminalize VAWIP in April 2020 and March 2021, respectively.¹⁵

The discussion of VAWIP and the legislative proposals presented throughout the region are a testament to the transnational nature of the Latin American women's movement (Alvarez et al. 2003; Friedman 2003, 2009; Restrepo Sanín 2020b; Sternbach et al. 1992). Efforts to make VAWIP visible are part of a broader movement to bring attention to gender-based violence, which originated in the first Latin American *Encuentros Feministas*. The regional mobilization around gender-based violence has recently received international attention with the #NiUnaMenos movement and campaign and the *Un Violator en Tu Camino* (A Rapist in Your Path) performance, but activism around gender-based violence (and VAWIP in particular) predates these protests and has made connections between multiple forms of violence (Ortiz 2021).

Activism around VAWIP emphasizes the connections between this form of violence in public with violence in the private sphere. An activist discussing VAWIP commented during an interview that "women were used to being beaten down in their homes, so being beaten by the mayor was no different for them."¹⁶ With the passing and then expansion of a multitude of laws on domestic and family violence against women (Friedman 2009; Htun and Weldon 2012), feminist activism has focused on the recognition of structural patriarchal violence, its expansion beyond the private sphere, and the role of (democratic) states in perpetrating and perpetuating gender-based violence (Bueno-Hansen 2009; Lagarde 2007, 2008; Segato 2014). Activism has resulted in the legal recognition of femicide or feminicide in 18 countries in the region (Lagarde 2007; Menjivar and Walsh 2017; Saccomano 2017).

Latin American feminists have emphasized the role of the state as perpetrator of violence as well as its responsibility for ending gender-based violence (Lagarde 2007; Segato 2014). The approval of legislation in this regard – against femicide or VAWIP – represents the symbolic promise of democratic states in guaranteeing gender equality and women's rights (Bueno-Hansen 2009; Segato 2003). However, activists are well aware of the limits of the law, precisely because it is embedded within larger heteropatriarchal, colonial, and racist structures. For activists and politicians working toward ending VAWIP, the approval of Law 243 is not the end of the fight, simply the legal recognition of VAWIP as a violation of women's rights and an affront to democracy. The continued existence of this problem is evidence of the failure of Bolivia's democracy to recognize women as equal citizens, but it is also an obstacle to the country's full democratization.

Conclusion

This article has shown that efforts to improve democracy in Latin America can have unexpected and even contradictory effects. First, gender quota laws are not enough to advance women's representation. This finding is not novel, as other scholars have discussed the limitations of quota laws more broadly (Ewig 2018; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo 2012; Friedman, Rossi, and Tabbush 2020; Htun 2016). However, this article contributes to our understanding of the multiple ways in which violence becomes an obstacle to advancing women's representation. In addition to the already documented barriers, VAWIP undermines the work of elected women, using judicial and administrative harassment and the manipulation of institutions and procedures intended to improve democracy against women. *Acoso político* (political harassment) limits the possibility of women advancing substantive policy changes.

Second, democratization efforts can backfire. The success of gender quotas and parity laws have made women more visible as political actors and therefore more likely targets of political violence. Anti-corruption mechanisms are used to attack women and undermine their competence as political actors while democratic discourse can be used to justify the attacks. At the same time, informal practices present an opportunity to undermine efforts to reach parity or promote women's leadership. Male political elites have little incentive to promote political and social changes that will threaten their power in politics and beyond (Valdini 2019). Quotas and parity laws have been met with resistance since they were approved and parties have used a range of strategies to undermine women's presence. As Towns (2010) explains, states adopt gender equality measures to appear modern and improve their status in the eyes of the international community without substantially transforming social and cultural practices. Gender equality norms are also frequently adopted by states where democracy is backsliding – such as in Bolivia under Morales' rule – or where dictators are becoming more entrenched (Berry 2017; Burnet 2008). In these cases, some gender equality measures are implemented to hide more egregious violations of women's rights and human rights more broadly. Gender quotas and the more recently approved VAWIP laws signal states' symbolic commitments to gender equality, but in countries with weak judicial institutions, a lack of enforcement and of support for gender equality measures, and staggering levels of gender-based violence and femicide, these are no more than empty promises.

The findings of this article show the interconnection between democratic institutions and VAWIP. Although the focus has been on Bolivia, cases from other countries suggest that similar connections exist elsewhere. The impeachment of Brazil's only woman president, Dilma Rousseff, was

grounded in questionable accusations of corruption and mismanagement. However, the process was profoundly gendered, shaping this case not as one of an accountability mechanism being successfully used against a “corrupt” (female) politician, but as one of the abuse of democratic procedures to undermine women’s power in politics (Encarnación 2017).

This article contributes to our understanding of VAWIP more broadly by showing specific ways in which this phenomenon presents itself. Although some scholars have suggested that there is a connection between democratization and VAWIP (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020; Cerva 2014), this article has done so more explicitly. It has not argued that democracy and gender quotas *cause* VAWIP, but it has demonstrated that VAWIP is perpetrated *via* democratic institutions. Quantitative data collection should define violence broadly and account for context-specific manifestations based on the institutional environment studied. Such data collection should be expanded to include not only violence against women, but also violence related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, education, and so forth.

Finally, this article has shown that VAWIP is not a consequence of “normal” politics but specifically a form of gender-based violence in which women are attacked simply for being women. The examples analyzed in the article show that although tensions between old and new political actors emerged with democratization, they do not always explain VAWIP. Instead, VAWIP is grounded in prevalent notions about the public sphere as (white, heterosexual, cisgender) men’s realm. Women’s presence constitutes a threat to that gendered political order and violence is used to maintain it. The democratic backsliding that is taking hold in the region makes it more important to pay attention to the ways in which democratic institutions and discourses are hijacked to maintain undemocratic political orders and violate human rights.

Notes

1. Virtual interview with a former councilor, La Paz, Bolivia, fall 2015.
2. Although I am discussing the problem of *acoso político* in Latin America, I use the acronym VAWIP because it better captures the experiences of women politicians in the region.
3. Interview with a local councilor, Bogotá, Colombia, fall 2016, in collaboration with the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy.
4. Segato (2014) talks about “femini-geno-cide” while Lagarde (2008) differentiates between femicide (the killing of a woman) and feminicide (the genocide of women). Feminicide is more broadly used in legislation and research in Latin America, but the two concepts are similar.
5. This was a recurrent topic in many of the interviews that I conducted in person and virtually between 2015 and 2020. It was also mentioned in the reports that I analyzed for this article, as well as in numerous legislative debates, proposals, and educational materials that were examined for this research project.
6. Virtual interview with a former councilor, La Paz, Bolivia, fall 2015.

7. Interviews with activists, La Paz, Bolivia, summer 2015.
8. Virtual interview with a former councilor, La Paz, Bolivia, fall 2015.
9. Interviews with activists and electoral authorities, La Paz, Bolivia, fall 2015; virtual interviews with electoral authorities, summer 2020.
10. Interviews with electoral authorities and activists, La Paz, Bolivia, summer 2015; virtual interviews with electoral authorities, Bolivia, summer 2020.
11. Interviews with activists, La Paz, Bolivia, summer 2015; virtual interviews with Bolivian politicians, fall 2015.
12. Interviews with activists and members of the Electoral Tribunal, La Paz, Bolivia, summer 2015; virtual interviews with Bolivian politicians, fall 2015.
13. Interview with an activist, La Paz, Bolivia, summer 2015.
14. Interview with an activist, La Paz, Bolivia, summer 2015.
15. Colombia's recent Electoral Reform, approved in December 2020, includes an article (Article 255) recognizing VAWIP. However, the Constitutional Court is revising the reform and, as of November 2021, it has not been approved by the court.
16. Interview with an activist, La Paz, Bolivia, summer 2015.

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