



**SUBMISSION TO
THE UNITED NATIONS' SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, ITS CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES:
COVID-19 AND THE INCREASE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Introduction

1. This submission is presented on behalf of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI),¹ by Sandra Pepera, NDI Director for Gender, Women and Democracy.²

2. While the number of women in politics has doubled in the past two decades, this only translates to 24 percent of parliamentarians globally. The World Economic Forum's 2018 Global Gender Gap Report notes that the largest gender disparity is in political empowerment at 77.1%. The Report states that "the progress achieved over the past decade has started to reverse," and at current rates of progress it will take 107 years to close the gap.³ That is why in March 2020, NDI launched Changing the Face of Politics, a decade long campaign to accelerate the pace of change on women's political empowerment.⁴

3. In launching the Changing the Face of Politics campaign, the Institute knows that addressing violence against women as a specific barrier to their political empowerment will continue to be at the forefront of our work. All violence against women is bad and must be stopped. However, in 2016, NDI launched the #NotTheCost campaign, a global initiative to stop violence against women in politics (VAW-P).⁵ The definition of VAW-P is aligned with the UN's Declaration on Violence Against Women and encompasses all forms of aggression,

¹ NDI is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that supports the development of democracy and governance globally, including promoting and strengthening inclusive political processes, state-civil society engagement, open and responsive governance institutions, and commitment to international frameworks. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. NDI's work focuses on supporting the creation of resilient democratic systems with the capacity to manage diverse and complex social, economic and political demands effectively. Democratic resilience requires that systems and processes take account of all populations, including women.

² With thanks to Tamar Eisen on the Gender, Women and Democracy team for her work on developing this submission.

³ "The Global Gender Gap Report: 2018," World Economic Forum, 2018.

http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf

⁴ "Changing the Face of Politics," The National Democratic Institute, March 2020.

<https://www.ndi.org/changing-face-politics>

⁵ "#NotTheCost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics," The National Democratic Institute, 2016.

<https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>

coercion, and intimidation against women as political actors simply because they are women. Violence against politically-active women - who NDI defines as activists, party members, party candidates, elected officials at any level, members of government, and electoral officials - has three distinct characteristics: it targets women because they are women, it is gendered in its form, and gendered in its impact. VAW-P is an abuse of women's human rights, a barrier to their full access to civil and political rights, and - because it seeks to exclude women's participation - it undermines democratic integrity.⁶ NDI's Board Chair and former Secretary of State, Madeleine K. Albright has said, "For women violence is not a rightful or inevitable cost of participation in politics. Participation in politics is the way we will end violence against women."

COVID-19's Impact on Women's Political Participation

4. NDI's focus on the integration of women's political empowerment approaches into its programming is grounded in the view that democratic resilience requires political systems and processes to take account of the voice and agency of women and all traditionally marginalized populations. COVID-19 is not only a global health crisis, but also a social, economic, and political shock for countries and communities around the world. The dual health and economic crises disproportionately harm women, older people, children, people with disabilities, and other marginalized populations. However, with more than 80 countries declaring states of emergency, the pandemic is also causing short- and medium-term changes in the political environment. These changes can be caused by the virus itself, and/or by government-led responses, and/or by actions within civil society and communities. To the extent that these limit or prevent women's participation in the public decision-making that impacts their lives, they undermine the effectiveness of immediate responses and the long-term recovery.

5. Systemic shocks, like the COVID-19 pandemic, generally result in a **shrinking political space** as governments move from a more consultative modus operandi to a 'control and command' position, which constrains women's autonomy and their engagement in public decision-making. Two of the drivers of that shrinking space which have particular relevance to violence against all women are changes to **gender norms** and **to the physical environment**.

6. Shocks often affect gender norms, which are rooted in women's experience of disempowerment relative to men. As part of the crisis response, governments and civil society may utilize a conservative social agenda – such as emphasizing women's 'proper' domestic roles – leading to the withdrawing of rights that women have gained. These norms can also influence the advocacy of and the delivery of services by non-state actors in situations where they are replacing ineffective government institutions or mechanisms. Finally, gender norms that do not

⁶ NDI also has a long record of working to combat the issue of violence against women in political parties (VAW-PP), and in 2018 launched Win With Women: Building Inclusive 21st Century Parties, which is an assessment and tool that helps parties become more inclusive institutions. The Institute has also been a leader in monitoring and mitigating violence against women in elections (VAW-E), through its Votes Without Violence toolkit. More recently, NDI has been researching the issue of online VAW-P, in its most recent report Tweets That Chill, which analyzed the prevalence and effect of online VAW-P in three case study countries. NDI is also currently working to better understand a specific type of online VAW-P - state-based gendered disinformation, and how it impacts women's political participation.

promote equity or justice can also create a permissive environment for violence targeting women and other marginalized groups, who are perceived to be countering patriarchal norms by engaging in public leadership which, during a crisis, is even more often viewed as a man's domain.

7. The negative effects of change in the physical environment during times of crisis on the role of individual women in politics are many and profound. A heightened sense of threat in external spaces is reinforced by increased levels of domestic sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). This domestic violence is both a symptom of and indicator for more generalized conflict in the community. Starting in their homes, women can face opposition from their husbands and other male family members who feel it is too dangerous for them to become or continue to be politically involved. A woman who is currently in an elected position may find herself under increased restrictions; this denies the woman her civil and political rights, and her constituents the right to be represented by the person of their choice. The very real disproportionate threat of bodily harm to women in crisis contexts leads them to choose not to participate. Being politically-active in a time of crisis can be dangerous,⁷ particularly if you are a female leader advocating or speaking in opposition to your own party or government.⁸

8. The trend of many governments to use a more military and security focused response to combat the crisis means that there will be an overweighting of security and intelligence forces, traditionally dominated by men, and an underweighting of other political institutions, such as the gender ministry, that have a higher level of women. The military actors involved in the Ebola response in Sierra Leone not only overlooked the differences between men and women's experience of the disease, but also reproduced "gender norms in masculinised spaces of decision-making and implementation."⁹ The uncritical use of security sector engagement to respond to disease outbreaks has been shown to reproduce and reinforce "a specific type of masculine dominance in decision-making," exacerbating insecurity for women and other marginalized groups.¹⁰ Emergency response bodies developed to govern under these circumstances may not be required to abide by quotas or other gender inclusion mechanisms put in place to ensure equal representation and violence targeting women who do participate in these hypermasculine governing structures may also be an issue.^{11,12}

⁷ "Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliaments in Europe" Inter-Parliamentary Union, October 2018. https://16dayscampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/en_2018-issues_brief_web.pdf

⁸ Bosman, Julie. "Health Officials Had to Face a Pandemic. Then Came the Death Threats." New York Times, June 22, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/us/coronavirus-health-officials.html>

⁹ "Ebola, Gender and Conspicuously Invisible Women in Global Health Governance," Third World Quarterly, 2016. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2015.1108827?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=ctwq20>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "No Party To Violence Compendium Report: Analyzing Violence Against Women in Political Parties," The National Democratic Institute, 2019. <https://www.ndi.org/publications/no-party-violence-compendium-report-analyzing-violence-against-women-political-parties>

¹² "Violence Against Women in Elections in Afghanistan: an IFES Assessment," IFES, April 2019. https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_april_2019_vawe_in_afghanistan_assessment_final.pdf

9. The potential for increased violence and conflict during electoral processes under the extended duration of the pandemic will also have a negative impact on women. Women voters, candidates, and election workers are often more vulnerable than men to widespread violence, and experience disproportionate impacts in tense electoral situations because they occupy a subordinate status in society.¹³ Therefore, at the very moment when women's voices are most needed to support a strong response and recovery, they are likely to be absent and/or silenced.

NDI's Survey of Democratic Health during the Pandemic

10. COVID-19 has thrown into stark relief the shadow and much more prevalent pandemic of SGBV, and violence against women and girls in particular. UN Secretary General, António Guterres, urged “all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19.”¹⁴ In March 2020, NDI established a bi-weekly survey of its senior staff in over fifty country offices across seven regions of the globe in order to understand the state of democratic health globally. The survey questions aim to track trends in the realms of governance, elections, political parties, civil society, communications and information, technology, and - because of its central importance to inclusive governance and democratic resilience - sexual and gender based violence (SGBV).

11. NDI's survey asks the following questions about SGBV during the pandemic:

- Since COVID-19, sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in your country has: significantly increased, increased, stayed the same, decreased, or significantly decreased.
- If there has been an increase [in SGBV], has civil society responded to provide enhanced prevention, protection or delivery of support services?
- If there has been an increase [in SGBV], have governments responded to provide enhanced prevention, protection or delivery of support services?

12. From the bi-weekly survey results, NDI has observed a continued increase in sexual and gender based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic across the world. In the April 2020 survey responses, 67% reported an increase in SGBV since the pandemic, with 14% noting a significant increase, and only 3.5% reported a decrease in SGBV in their country. These numbers remained consistent in the May 2020 survey responses, with 67% reporting an increase in SGBV, and 15% reporting a significant increase. In the June 2020 survey responses, 70% of NDI's responses reported an increase, with 20% noting a significant increase. Across all rounds of the survey, an average of 30% of NDI's senior staff in-country reported that the level of SGBV in the country remained the same. No decreases in SGBV have been reported since the first survey in April.

¹³ “Votes Without Violence,” The National Democratic Institute, 2017.

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Votes_Without_Violence_Manual.pdf

¹⁴ “UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horrifying global surge,’” UN News, April 2020.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

13. NDI observed that government action in response to the increase in SGBV has generally been insufficient for the situation. In the April survey, 78% reported that the country's government had not responded to provide enhanced prevention, protection, or delivery of support services, and only 22% reported that the government had responded to the increase in SGBV. These results were similar in the May 2020 survey, in which 72% of respondents reported that governments had not responded to provide support, while 28% reported that the government had responded. In the most recent June survey, NDI did observe an increase in government response to the issue of SGBV, with 58% reporting that the government had provided a response, against 42% still reporting that the government had not responded to the increase in SGBV.

14. NDI has also observed a significant increased civil society response to provide enhanced prevention, protection, or delivery of support services. In the April 2020 survey, 54% noted a civil society response to the increase in SGBV. In May and June, 71% of responses from NDI's network reported that civil society had indeed stepped up to provide enhanced support services in both months.

15. Survey results in June also found that 53% of NDI respondents noted an increased distrust among citizens and a 71% increase distrust of the government since the beginning of the pandemic. In June, 45% recorded an increase in the government's suspension, modification, and/or removal of individual or collective rights and protections in the name of security, however this was recorded as high as 69% during previous rounds of the survey. These results, while applicable to all citizens, will have a disproportionate impact on women and further demonstrate the shrinking political space for women as a result of COVID-19.

16. The impact on women's political participation of the acceleration of online engagement and mechanisms for civics, politics, economic, and social activity due to movement and convening restrictions imposed by COVID-19, must also be noted. Online spaces can be particularly important in helping women and other marginalized groups to overcome barriers to becoming politically-active, thereby broadening the inclusive and participatory nature of democracy. However, the digital world has also become a forum for disinformation, hate speech, abuse, and harassment targeting politically-active women. This online violence against women creates a hostile environment which causes women to self-censor, be silent, or otherwise withdraw from online political discourse.

17. There are already reports that as much of the world has moved to remote and digital work during COVID-19, online VAW-P has increased.¹⁵ Increased cybersecurity vulnerabilities and online hate speech create additional danger for women to operate online, who already face high rates of online violence.¹⁶ Additionally, the potential for misogynistic gender norms to be leveraged by malign actors as part of online disinformation campaigns can create additional threats to women's safety and rights. For example, women's rights organizations and activists

¹⁵ "Gender and COVID-19: A Guidance Note for Parliaments," Inter-Parliamentary Union, April 2020. <https://www.ipu.org/gender-and-covid-19-guidance-note-parliaments>

¹⁶ "Tweets That Chill: Examining Online Violence Against Women in Politics," The National Democratic Institute, May 2019. <https://www.ndi.org/tweets-that-chill>

are increasingly experiencing a form of online violence called “Zoombombing,” in which their meetings and webinars are hacked into and attacked with violent language.

18. There are also concerns for women’s political participation as governments consider moving political processes online. While digital voting is an important mechanism for allowing elections to take place under movement restrictions, it can pose challenges to women’s ability to vote. For example, there is a major gender digital divide, in which 327 million fewer women than men have smartphones and can access the Internet.¹⁷ Moreover, voting online from home increases avenues for coercion and violence whereby significant male family members may negatively influence women’s voting intentions.

19. There have been some positive developments for women as parliaments went virtual, including more flexible work hours and the change in the culture of parliament as seen in the case of the UK parliament.¹⁸ However, moving legislative chambers online can also have negative implications for women’s participation. Issues to be navigated include: the increased merger of work and domestic responsibilities within the home; autonomous access to the Internet, and coercion and violence from family members at home.

Examples of Governance Responses to SGBV during COVID-19

20. NDI has been reviewing examples of the way governments around the world have been responding to violence against women and other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows is an illustrative list of good practices found at different levels of government, and is by no means meant to be comprehensive.

21. In **Romania**, Gabriela Firea, the Mayor of Bucharest, inaugurated the largest center for victims of domestic violence in the Romanian capital at the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic.¹⁹ In **France**, the national government responded to the crisis of domestic violence by: providing grants to organizations working to combat VAW; establishing victim alert systems in pharmacies, paying for hotel rooms to be used as shelters, and setting up a texting emergency number specifically dedicated to women with disabilities experiencing violence.²⁰

¹⁷ “Bridging the Digital Gender Divide,” OECD, 2018.

<http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>

¹⁸ Coombes, Izzi. “The new virtual parliament could make the 50/50 gender split a reality,” Independent, April 22, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/virtual-parliament-democracy-gender-equality-zoom-a9478361.html>.

¹⁹ “Mayor Firea inaugurated the largest social center for victims of domestic violence in Bucharest,” The Mayor, April 3, 2020.

<https://www.themayor.eu/en/mayor-firea-inaugurated-the-largest-social-center-for-victims-of-domestic-violence-in-bucharest>

²⁰ “Violences intrafamiliales : quels sont les nouveaux dispositifs d’alerte?” En Marche, April 2, 2020.

<https://en-marche.fr/articles/actualites/mesures-violences-intrafamiliales>

22. Gender committees and caucuses have been key to advocating for a gender-sensitive response to the pandemic. At the municipal level in **Ukraine**, gender-focused caucuses²¹ mobilized quickly to monitor progress in meeting community needs. Their credibility and gender-responsive experience has enhanced the caucuses' ability to reach women and other vulnerable groups. In **Colombia**, where rates of domestic abuse have grown by 200 percent since the beginning of the pandemic, the Women's Equality Commission in Congress has advocated for support to victims of violence to be designated essential services during the pandemic. It also started a social media campaign with the hashtag #MujeresSinVirusdeViolencia to raise awareness of the issue.²²

23. Parliaments and political parties have also offered recommendations on policies and actions to effectively respond to the shadow pandemic of violence against women. **Chile's** Progressive Party, set out policy recommendations for COVID-19 response, in which they call for the urgent creation of public infrastructure and emergency services to protect survivors of VAW.²³ Regional parliaments have also been active: **Parlatino**, the Latin American Parliament, adopted a resolution, which called for the gender mainstreaming of the COVID-19 response and inclusion of women in all levels of decision making;²⁴ and the Chair of the **European Parliament's** Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Evelyn Regner, issued a statement urging the European Union and its Member States to increase support to victims of domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis.²⁵

24. Finally, the Institute has been working with parliaments and political parties around the world to help support gender-sensitive government responses to COVID-19. For example, In April 2020, NDI assisted the parliament in **Georgia's** Gender Equality Council (GEC) to develop a set of recommendations focused on the prevention of domestic violence. Some of these recommendations have been taken up. For example, the Government of Georgia has ensured non-stop access to free services for survivors of domestic violence, such as crisis centers and shelters.

25. The focus of NDI's work in **Tunisia** has been to help a network of women parliamentarians to raise awareness about the increase in VAW and threats to marginalized communities, which led to a hearing session with the Ministry of Women where they assessed the effectiveness of the measures adopted to combat the increase in violence against women during the lock-down period. As a result of the meeting, the Minister of Women committed to

²¹ "Ukraine's Women Leaders Join in Kyiv for Nation's First Women's Congress," National Democratic Institute, March 22, 2018.

<https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/ukraine-s-women-leaders-join-kyiv-nation-s-first-women-s-congress>

²² "Country Compilation of Parliamentary Responses to the Pandemic," Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020.

<https://www.ipu.org/country-compilation-parliamentary-responses-pandemic#U>

²³ "Progressive Party of Chile," <https://www.progresistas.cl/>

²⁴ "Declaración del Parlamento Latinoamericano y Caribeño ante el impacto diferenciado que el COVID 19 tiene para mujeres y niñas," Parlamento Latinoamericano y Caribeño, April 2020.

<https://parlatino.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Declaracion-parlatino-tema-genero.pdf>

²⁵ "COVID-19: Stopping the rise in domestic violence during lockdown," European Parliament, April 2020.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200406IPR76610/covid-19-stopping-the-rise-in-domestic-violence-during-lockdown>

manage a cross-government collaboration to: follow up on the application of the law to combat violence against women; increase the capacity of domestic violence shelters; and find a solution for the financial issues facing domestic workers which had made them vulnerable to violence.

Recommendations

26. In the context of the pandemic, government and international policy responses have to ensure two things: that they do not reinforce pre-existing and more sharply exacerbated inequities; and that international assistance seeks to maximize the long-term transformative potential for inclusive political participation, which will strengthen democratic resilience. In order to do this, it is critical that governance responses to the recovery address structural issues of power and inequality, and not just the immediate biomedical and economic needs. The ‘tyranny of the urgent’²⁶ often dictates the approach to public policy, missing the key opportunity to address the underlying causes that lead to women’s disproportionately negative experience of a systemic shock. These are manifested as increased levels of SGBV and a further loss of their ability to engage in public decision-making processes - both of which are characteristics of shocks and shrinking political space.

27. Applying lessons learned from other recovery and transitional situations to international assistance programs responding to the impact of COVID-19, can offer direction on strategies to employ in specific political contexts which will have different dynamics for women’s participation. Recognizing the critical need to address the informal norms that underscore women’s lack of political power and status that are at the root of the gender inequality from which SGBV arises, will be key in all program responses.

28. Any programs and responses should support women’s groups in the local community. Focused resources and efforts to support women in civil society and women’s movements to continue under the restricted conditions - including through online activism - is critical. This should include bolstering the work they are doing on the frontlines to support women and children who may be locked down with abusive partners or family members, as well as pressing governments to make additional services available.

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²⁶ Smith, Julia, “Overcoming the ‘tyranny of the urgent’: integrating gender into disease outbreak preparedness and response,” *Gender and Development*, June 28, 2019.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2019.1615288>