# How Does Political Violence Target Women?

*New Data from ACLED*

This brief presents new data from ACLED on political violence targeting women. It shows that violence can affect women in all walks of life – from politicians, voters, and activists, to broader categories of women facing everyday threats – but that there is great variance in the *types* of political violence and who the primary *perpetrators* of this violence are, especially regionally. Although we at times assume violence targeting women is primarily sexual in character, non-sexual attacks are actually the most commonly reported. The trends identified underscore the importance of the core foundation of the UN Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS): the use of political violence targeting women is strategic, as women are political actors.

## Brief Points

- First published data on political violence targeting women (PVTW) from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED), collated in partnership with the Strauss Center at The University of Texas at Austin.

- The PVTW data capture five different types of political violence and seven different categories of perpetrators.

- There is variation across geographic regions, but overall non-sexual attacks are the most commonly reported type of political violence targeting women. The perpetrators are most commonly anonymous or unidentified armed groups.

- The ACLED-PVTW data constitute an important contribution to the growing systematic empirical research on gender, allowing us to better respond to the current call for evidence-based WPS policies.

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## Introduction

In the UN Security Council's yearly Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), demands for improved protection of women human rights defenders and women's organizations are a constant. Yet, many voices caution against making protection from conflict-related sexual violence an overly dominant theme, as it risks downgrading women from political actors to victims.

To an outside observer, this can appear to be a puzzling contradiction. Is protection beneficial or detrimental to women's participation? To address this question, we argue that the WPS discourse is often restricted by too limited an understanding of how political violence targets women, and how trends in violence relate to women's political agency. The lack of systematic data on these issues has been an obstacle to improving programming and policy.

This brief presents the first published data on political violence targeting women (PVTW) from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), collated in partnership with the Strauss Center at The University of Texas at Austin.[1] We outline how different types of political violence target women and who the main perpetrators are, comparing trends across different geographic regions. We contend that this violence must be understood as a conflict strategy that political actors engage in with impunity, rather than a crime or weakness in public security. As we are approaching the 20th anniversary of the first UN Security Council Resolution on WPS, UNSCR 1325 (2000), we conclude with a reflection on how efforts for participation and protection can be enhanced by a better understanding of political violence targeting women. These data mark a starting point, with central implications for both policy and research.

## How Does Political Violence Target Women?

In ACLED data, PVTW is understood as "the use of [physical] force by a group with a political purpose or motivation" in the public sphere in which women and girls are the only, the majority, or the primary targets.[2] The data focus on five different types of political violence:

1. *Attacks (non-sexual)*
2. *Sexual violence*
3. *Abductions and forced disappearances*
4. *Mob violence*
5. *Explosions and other forms of remote violence*.

They show that violence can affect women in all walks of life, from politicians, voters, and activists, to broader categories of women facing everyday threats. Violence can take place in the context of war but is also common in other situations where the political process is contested. Figure 1 describes how the five types of political violence women face vary across geographic regions.

Although current WPS debates at times assume violence targeting women is primarily sexual in character, non-sexual *attacks* are actually the most commonly reported type of political violence. This type makes up over two-thirds of PVTW in the Middle East, Southeastern and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean.[3] Attacks occur within war-time contexts, where executions by the Islamic State in Syria targeting women for blasphemy or for perceived support of opposition constitute an example. Attacks can also take place outside of war-time environments. This can involve assaults by state militaries in Central Asia against human rights defenders, or targeting by cartels

in Latin America against women perceived to oppose drug trafficking.

Even if non-sexual attacks are more frequently reported, this does not mean that *sexual violence* is not a serious threat to women. This form of political violence makes up well over one-third of PVTW in both Africa as well as Southeast Asia. It is well recognized that this violence occurs within war-time settings, such as the rapes of women by the SPLM-IO in South Sudan, or in crisis contexts, such as the rapes of women ranging from senior citizens to young girls by the Myanmar military. However, sexual violence can also take place outside of war or crisis contexts, a prominent example being the rapes of opposition supporters in Zimbabwe by armed ZANU-PF agents.

A significant type of PVTW often under-problematized in WPS settings is *mob violence*. These are cases in which spontaneously organized, unarmed (or crudely armed) mobs engage in violence targeting women. In many cases, these mobs have links to political parties or religious groups, yet are routinely left out of analysis capturing political violence and conflict due to their 'informal' nature. This type of violence is most common across South Asia (such as the targeting of women in India thought to be 'child-lifters'), but is also prevalent in Africa where women thought to engage in witchcraft or sorcery are targeted.

*Abductions and forced disappearances* constitute another form of PVTW typically overlooked in WPS settings. This violence is most commonly reported across Africa. A well-known example is the Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014. Yet this violence is prevalent even when not as extensively publicized as the #BringBackOurGirls campaign.
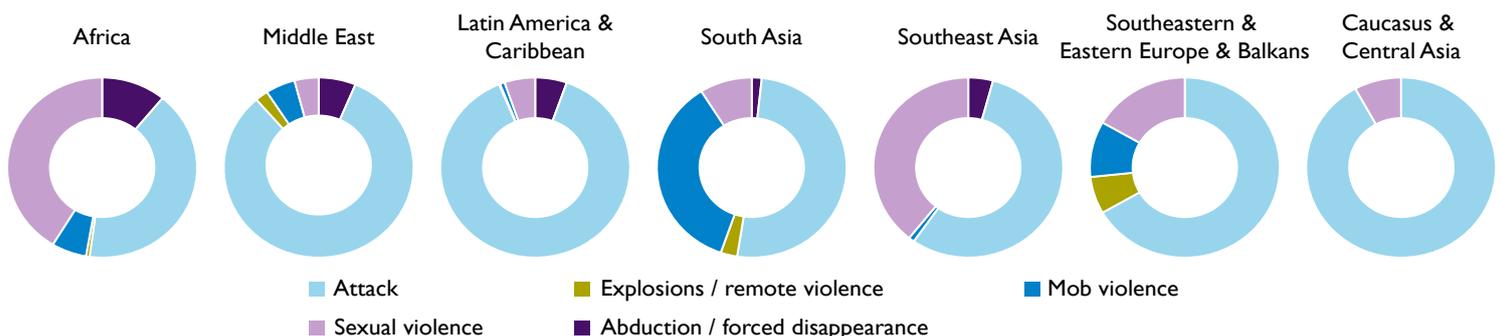


Africa    Middle East    Latin America & Caribbean    South Asia    Southeast Asia    Southeastern & Eastern Europe & Balkans    Caucasus & Central Asia

- Attack
- Explosions / remote violence
- Mob violence
- Sexual violence
- Abduction / forced disappearance

Figure 1. Political violence targeting women, by type of violence. Source ACLED

| | 0% | 10% | 20% | 30% | 40% | 50% | 60% | 70% | 80% | 90% | 100% |
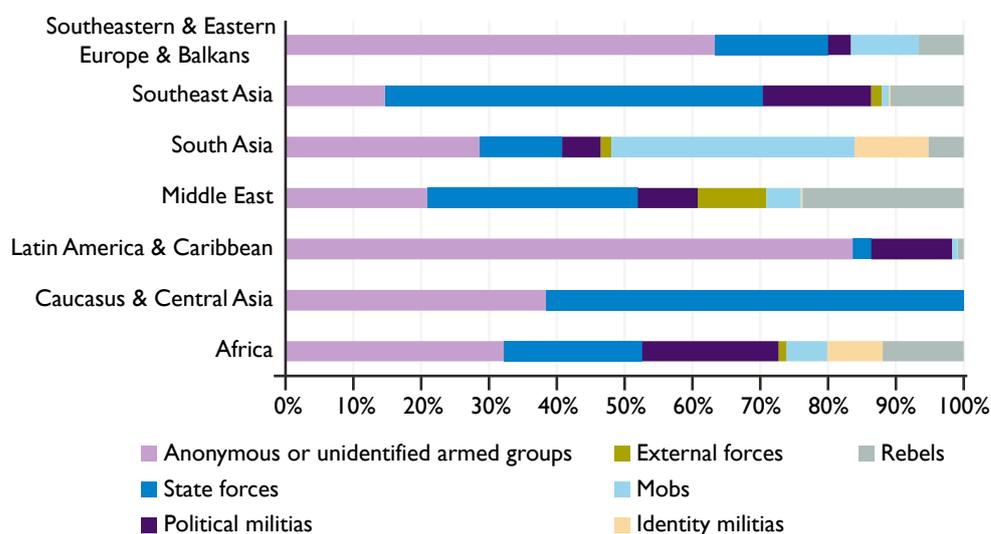
**Figure 2. Political violence targeting women, by perpetrator. Source: ACLED**

Legend:
- Anonymous or unidentified armed groups
- State forces
- Political militias
- External forces
- Mobs
- Identity militias
- Rebels

Communal groups in Sudan and South Sudan regularly abduct women as part of contestations over livelihoods. Other prominent examples include the Mayi Mayi militias of the Congo, who kidnap women and girls as a form of 'looting', demanding ransoms for their return from local communities; or rebel groups like Al Shabaab, who abduct women with links to the government, or aid workers, in the course of their campaigns for power in territorial contestations. It is imperative that abductions and forced disappearances are not omitted from analytical frameworks for understanding violence against women, as it is a form of violence explicitly aimed at reducing the visibility of those targeted, leaving the status of many women and girls unknown.

Lastly, *explosions and other forms of remote violence* can be used to target women. This type of violence is rarer given that the remote nature of these events, by definition, makes using them in targeted attacks where gender is a salient identity more difficult. Such violence can take the form of bombs targeting girls' schools in Afghanistan, or a grenade thrown at a female journalist in Greece.

## Who Are the Perpetrators?

In addition to the variance in *forms* political violence can take, the primary *perpetrators* of this violence vary, especially regionally, as outlined in Figure 2. While PVTW is sometimes talked about as though it is unrelated to ongoing conflicts and contentions, these patterns actually tend to mirror political violence strategies at large in these regions.

Data show that the most common category of perpetrators is *anonymous or unidentified armed groups*. This highlights important issues. That we know so little about who the perpetrators are in many acts of PVTW can be the result of insufficiently detailed reporting, due to a lack of capacity to conduct gender-aware reporting or due to the complexity of crisis contexts. However, another important reason is the wish of the perpetrator to preserve strategic anonymity. Some actors may 'outsource' PVTW to agents to avoid responsibility. That such groups are doing the bidding of others is probable, given patterns in the types and geography of violence in many crisis contexts. Over one-third of all reported PVTW has been perpetrated by unidentified agents. This underscores how important it is to include such actors in data collection efforts, or we risk minimizing the threat that women face.

Of identified agents, *state forces*, such as the military or police, are the primary perpetrators of PVTW in Southeast Asia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and the Middle East. In all of these regions, data on political violence show that state forces have been the primary threat to their own civilian population at large, so this trend is not surprising. For example, in the ongoing 'Drug War' in the Philippines, police regularly target members of the opposition, tagged as 'narco-politicians'; many women politicians, such as prominent and outspoken Senator Leila de Lima, have been targeted as a result.

In Africa, *political militias* perpetrate the same proportion of PVTW as state forces. Political

militias are armed, organized political gangs, often acting on behalf of political elites, and hence include pro-government militias that are not formally part of the state apparatus. Political militias are especially active across Africa, and it is not surprising to find their activity levels mirroring that of state forces given the ties that may exist between the two. For example, the Imbonerakure – the armed wing of the ruling CNDD-FDD party in Burundi, and hence a pro-government militia – is the most active political militia engaging in PVTW in Africa.

*External forces* can include both state forces active outside of their home country and multilateral coalitions. These agents make up about one-tenth of PVTW in the Middle East; unsurprisingly, this region is where civilian targeting at large by these actors is also the most prevalent. Israeli state forces active in the West Bank are one of the primary perpetrators of this violence, which indicates that the risk for women is not limited to the war-time contexts that otherwise dominate the region.

*Mobs* are the primary perpetrator of PVTW in South Asia. Indeed, they are responsible for about one-third of all civilian targeting at large in the region. Mobs may have links to political parties or religious groups, or can be vigilante groups taking what they perceive to be justice into their own hands. In addition, *identity militias* feature most prominently in the PVTW landscape of South Asia as well. These groups coalesce around communal identities; they are more formally organized than mobs and are often armed. In South Asia, they are largely centered on religious groups or castes, often targeting women of other religious groups or lower castes.

*Rebel groups* are those whose goal it is to counter an established national governing regime through violence. Such groups are active across many regions, with a number of groups posing a heightened threat to women. While PVTW at the hands of rebels makes up about a quarter of PVTW in the Middle East, groups like Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, and the Lord's Resistance Army have long posed a significant threat to women in Africa.

## What Do These Results Mean for WPS?

The trends identified in the PVTW data underscore the importance of the core foundation of UNSCR 1325 (2000): the use of political violence

## Why Are the ACLED-PVTW Data so Important?

New data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), collated in partnership with the Strauss Center at The University of Texas at Austin, capture political violence targeting women (PVTW) and span across all countries of ACLED coverage. This allows us to compare PVTW cross-nationally. New data are published weekly, which provide near-real-time coverage and help capture the multi-faceted threats that women face. Information comes from traditional media in over 20 different languages; select new media; reports from international organizations and institutions; and, importantly, through partnerships with local conflict observatories based in the field.

The data specifically capture physical violence in the public, political sphere – non-physical violence (e.g. psychological violence, threats, cyberviolence) and violence in the private sphere (e.g. intimate partner violence, domestic violence) are thus excluded.

These new data are important because they address critical gaps and limitations to the monitoring and assessment of political gender-based violence of a physical nature. First, women consistently face political violence outside of contentious periods like elections and war, so it is important to extend the temporal scope of coverage to capture this. Second, it is essential to extend coverage to all types of physical violence to capture the full range of physical violence that women face. Lastly, it is important not to limit our understanding of the perpetrators of this violence to named and formally organized actors, as this leaves out anonymous or unidentified armed groups, as well as spontaneous mobs – both of whom are responsible for large proportions of PVTW.

targeting women is strategic, as women are political actors.[4] When we understand this, it also becomes apparent that violence is aimed at hindering the myriad ways in which women engage in political participation. This realization has two central implications for our continued efforts to craft effective protective measures that can ensure and fortify women's agency.

The first concerns how we talk about women and political violence in the WPS debate. As a community, we so often rely on the passive construction of the phrase 'violence against women' – a statement with no active agent, in which violence happens *to* women without focus on the perpetrator or the reasons behind the violence.[5] Instead, the new ACLED data capturing PVTW stem from the premise that it is only by understanding who the *perpetrators* of this violence are, the *tactics* they may use, and how these can both *vary* across different geographic regions and conflict environments that steps can be taken to effectively combat violence targeting women. By deliberately using the term 'targeting', ACLED wants to underline the importance of connecting violence to political agency, while also noting that the violence explored in these data is only a subset of all violence that affects women (i.e. women are hurt and killed alongside men every day, in addition to facing the targeted violence outlined here). In this way, we can highlight how women are already important for, and participating in, political processes. This starting point will allow us to create a WPS policy which places women as actors in the center and ensures that measures for protection and participation become mutually reinforcing.

Second, if we understand that women are actors along with men, then our continued efforts to support their equal participation should consider variations between tactics of political violence used to target women compared to political violence patterns at large. This can allow us to take steps towards *security equality*, meaning that different groups should be equally protected from the threats that affect their security.[6] As

suggested in the data, sexual violence, abductions and forced disappearances, as well as mob violence are all proportionally more common in violence that targets women. In this effort, the ACLED findings should be placed in relation to the quickly developing systematic empirical research examining women's and men's respective situations and roles in war and in political processes. The collection and compilation of sex-disaggregated data, and data connecting women's roles and security to data on broader trends in political violence – such as the ACLED-PVTW data – constitute necessary progressive steps. Combined, these research efforts will allow us to further the ambition of UNSCR 1325 – which called for an improvement in data collection already in 2000 – and to better respond to the current call for developing evidence-based WPS policies in the post-2020 period.[7] ■

### Notes

1. This brief is based on ACLED-PVTW data. For information on definitions, methodology, and what the data can and cannot be used for, see Kishi, R., et al. (2019) '"Terribly and terrifyingly normal": political violence targeting women'. Available at: www.acleddata.com/2019/05/29/terribly-and-terrifyingly-normal-political-violence-targeting-women/

2. Raleigh, C., et al. (2010) 'Introducing ACLED: an armed conflict location and event dataset: special data feature.' *Journal of Peace Research* 47(5): 651–660.

3. Data for the Caucasus & Central Asia as well as Latin America & the Caribbean are currently unpublished by ACLED.

4. See Tryggestad, T. (2009) 'Trick or Treat - The UN and Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security', *Global Governance* 15: 539.

5. Katz, J. (2012) 'Violence against women – it's a men's issue'. *Ted Talk*.

6. Olsson, L. (2018) 'Same Peace, Different Quality? The Importance of Security Equality for Quality Peace' in M. Joshi and P. Wallensteen (eds.) *Understanding Quality Peace*. New York: Routledge.

7. Olsson, L. and T. I. Gizelis (2019) 'The Production of the Global Study' in S. Davies and J. True (eds.) *Oxford University Press Handbook on Women, Peace and Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## THE AUTHORS

Roudabeh Kishi is Research Director of ACLED. She leads data collection across the globe and oversees research and analysis, including on PVTW. Louise Olsson is Senior Researcher at PRIO. She developed and led a Research Working Group on WPS (2009–2018), strengthening empirical research to support UNSCR 1325 implementation.

## THE PROJECT

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is the highest quality, most widely used real-time data and analysis source on political violence and protest around the world. Practitioners, researchers, and governments depend on ACLED for the latest information on current conflict and disorder patterns. For more, see www.acleddata.com.

## PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.