



Violence Targeting Women in Politics

Implications for the UN Security Council

On 18 January 2022, Norway organized an Open Debate in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on the nexus between protection and participation of women in peace processes and how the UNSC could improve its capacity to formulate effective preventive and responsive measures. This brief builds on research, and on novel data and examples of political violence targeting women in politics (PVTWIP), as collected and tracked by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). While this demonstrates that PVTWIP is a problem that concerns us all, examples of countries discussed in the UNSC context illustrate the need for country-specific approaches to ensure that a diverse group of women can fully, equally, and meaningfully participate in political processes toward peace.

Brief Points

- The January 2022 UNSC Open Debate on Protecting Participation highlighted the nexus between these two core Women, Peace and Security (WPS) themes.
- The UNSC debate underlined that achieving the WPS objective of women's full, equal, and meaningful participation requires both sharpening the understanding of the complex problem of violence and improving the UN's capacity to respond.
- Novel data from ACLED demonstrate the need to recognize that addressing PVTWIP requires country-specific approaches. This is key for formulating effective preventive and responsive measures.
- PVTWIP is not a problem that is exclusive to conflict states, it is a problem on which most states can share experiences on how to develop effective prevention and response strategies.

Roudabeh Kishi
*Armed Conflict Location &
Event Data Project (ACLED)*

Louise Olsson
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

Introduction

As recognized by the UN Secretary-General, women are at the frontline of peace and constitute an amplifying number of voices in political processes.¹ This engagement makes women the target of political violence – a fact that highlights the connection between participation and the need for improved protection. This protection and participation nexus² was first articulated by women civil society organizations and, in 2021, the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) raised demands for improved protection – protection measures that should be developed in dialogue with the women concerned.

Responding to such concerns, on 18 January 2022, Norway organized the first Open Debate on *Protecting Participation: Addressing violence targeting women in peace and security processes* in the UN Security Council (UNSC). As formulated in the concept note, the aim was to “address how violence, intimidation, and reprisals against women – because of their engagement in peace and security processes – threaten our shared goal of ensuring women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation in all stages of peace processes.” In order to move from improved understanding to practice, the concept note of the Open Debate further specified the need to “gather and share recommendations on ways we can strengthen and develop our prevention and response strategies.”

In this brief, we argue that when the UNSC moves forward on realizing the insights of this important Open Debate, there is a need to specifically recognize the diverse roles women play in political processes, both directly and indirectly – as politicians, candidates for office, party supporters, voters, government officials, activists, social leaders, and human rights defenders. This diversity means that all can face violence but in different forms. Building on research,³ novel data, and examples of physical political violence targeting women in politics (PVTWIP), as collected and tracked by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED),⁴ this brief presents examples of what forms PVTWIP can take in regions around the world and in countries discussed in the UNSC context. These examples underline the need for a country-specific approach to prevention and response (for a description of the data, see ‘The Project’ box on page 4).

A Problem for Us All: A Regional Overview

As Figure 1 demonstrates, there is substantial variation in the targets of PVTWIP in different regions. For the UNSC, this means that it should not consider political violence as a problem that is exclusive to conflict states; we can see violence targeting women in politics in the US, in Europe, and in China.

Another critical point indicated by the figure is that the targets of this violence vary across

regions. Ergo, in-depth analysis of each given country situation can be assumed to be critical. That said, it further entails that all states can continue to share their varying experiences on how to achieve effective prevention and response strategies, as the UNSC debate in January also demonstrated.

Examples from Countries Discussed in the UNSC Context

The primary focus of the UNSC is on specific country-situations. Let us therefore look more closely at ACLED data, and examples therein, on countries in focus for UNSC deliberations in different forms.

As exemplified by Figure 2, the UNSC has supported peace and security processes in a large number of African countries. In the examples, we can see that women political party supporters face the greatest risk in Burundi and Sudan. In **Burundi**, this targeting often takes the form of non-sexual attacks and comes at the hands of the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the ruling party, acting as a violent pro-government militia, especially around contentious periods like elections. For example, members of the Imbonerakure attacked and injured a woman supporting an opposition party in Burarana on 29 April 2020, forcing her to be hospitalized. In **Sudan**, meanwhile, such targeting has been rarer, but has come in the form of forced disappearance by state forces. For example, on 12 April 2015, an Umma Party member was forcibly

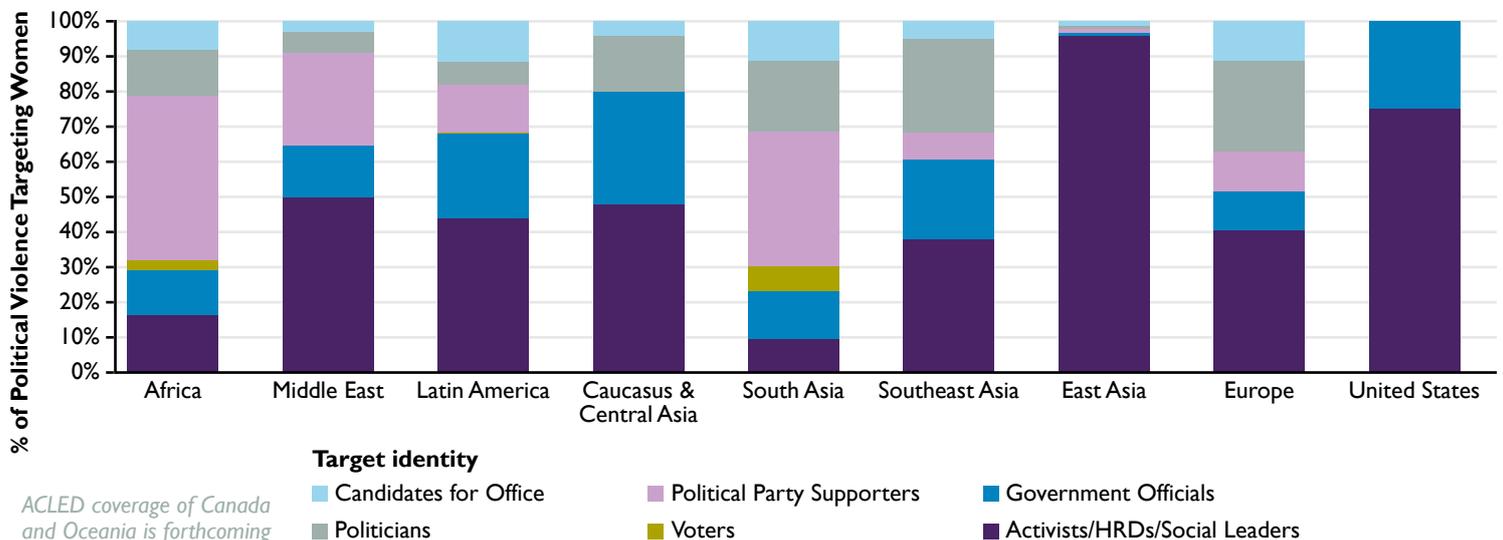


Figure 1: Regional variation in Political Violence Targeting Women in Politics (PVTWIP), by target identity

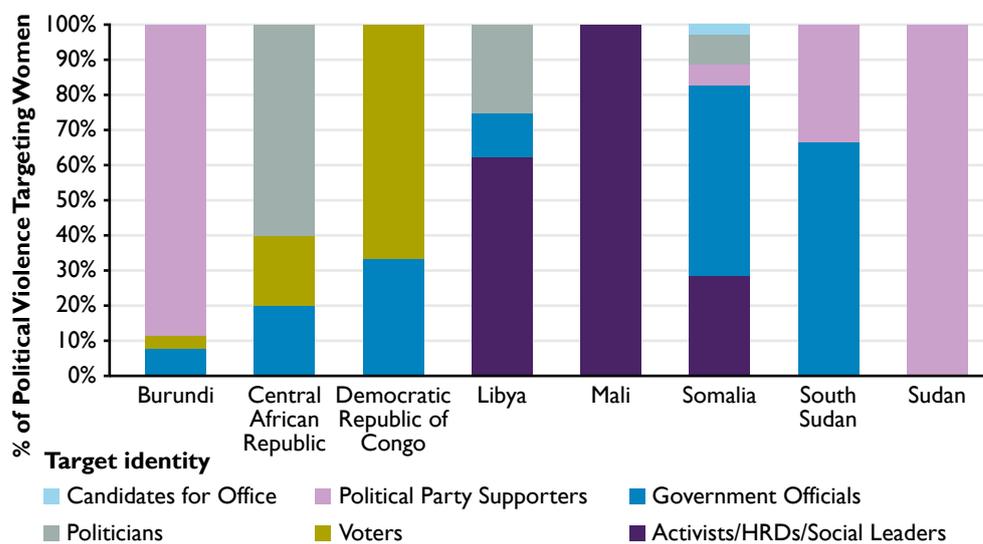


Figure 2: National variation in PVTWIP, by target identity in Africa

taken from her car by suspected National Intelligence and Security Services agents in Omdurman. While she was released days later, she was severely beaten while in detention.

Women activists, human rights defenders, and social leaders are those primarily targeted in Libya and Mali. In **Libya**, such violence is often in the form of non-sexual attacks, carried out by anonymous or unidentified armed groups. For example, on 10 November 2020, a woman lawyer and human rights activist was killed by an unidentified armed group in Benghazi. In **Mali**, such targeting has been rarer, but has come in the form of abductions by rebels. For example, on 24 December 2016, a woman running a humanitarian organization focused on helping children was kidnapped in Gao by Al Mourabitoun.

In Somalia and South Sudan, the primary targets are government officials. In **Somalia**, such targeting is often carried out by Al Shabaab or by anonymous armed groups (who may have links to Al Shabaab), often taking the form of non-sexual attacks. For example, on 2 September 2021, suspected Al Shabaab members killed a woman National Intelligence and Security Agency staff member, who they had abducted months prior, in the Shibis district of Mogadishu. In **South Sudan**, while such targeting tends to be rarer, it is often carried out by state forces, and is both sexual and non-sexual in nature. For example, on 29 March 2014, 300 security forces surrounded the home of the

gender and human rights affairs advisor, raiding her home and assaulting her.

In the **Central African Republic**, politicians are most at risk, with targeting often at the hands of political militias or mobs, and commonly taking the form of non-sexual attacks, abductions, or mob violence. For example, on 6 March 2014, Ex-Séléka kidnapped the head of the district of Dangavo, only releasing her after a week once a ransom was paid. In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, meanwhile, voters are the women in politics at most risk, with targeting carried out by unidentified armed groups and sexual in nature.

For example, on 14 January 2019, unidentified armed men attacked a village in Masisi, raping at least two women while killing others, accusing the residents of voting for the wrong candidates.

In Asia, **Afghanistan** has come to the forefront of discussions in the UNSC. This country-situation underlines the nexus between women's participation and protection, with women in politics facing increased risk in the country since the fall of Kabul in August 2021, as highlighted at the Open Debate in January 2022 by Ms. Zarqa Yaftali, Executive Director of the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation. Figure 3 reflects the women in politics who are most targeted in Afghanistan; even prior to the Taliban takeover, however, government officials, such as court employees like judges and off-duty police officers, faced targeted violence by the Taliban as well as by anonymous armed groups. For example, on 6 October 2020, a woman employee of the appellate court was killed by unknown gunmen in Khost city.

Another Asian country that has received increased UNSC interest is **Myanmar**, especially in light of the aftermath of the February 2021 coup. Since then, ACLED data show that politically-motivated attacks have increased dramatically, and with that, attacks on women engaged in the political sphere have also risen, especially attacks on government officials and political party supporters. This is in addition to the targeting of women activist leaders of the protest movement. For example, on 18 July 2021, in Kin

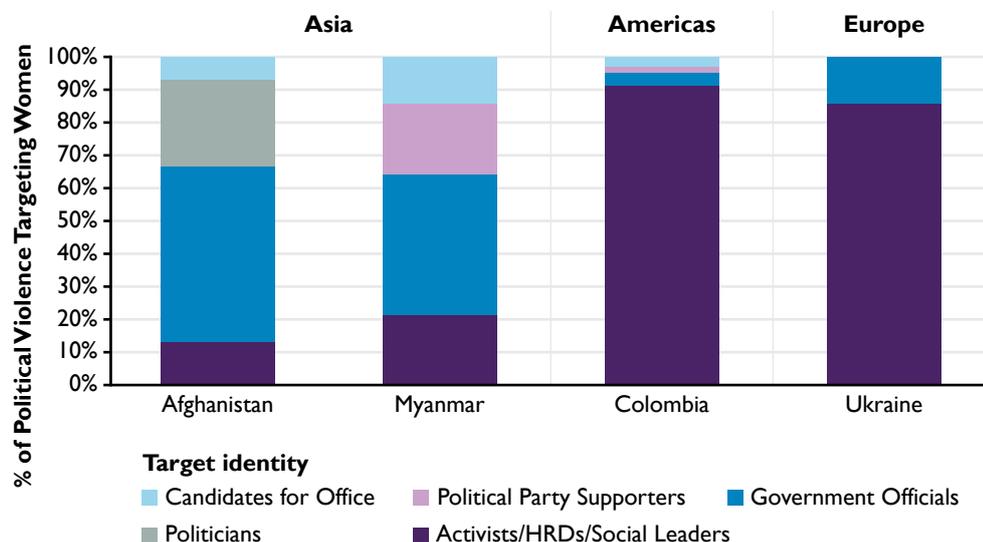


Figure 3: National variation in PVTWIP, by target identity in Asia, the Americas and Europe

Mun Chon village in Bago-East, three unknown gunmen entered the house of an anti-coup activist and shot her while also injuring her daughter; military and police arrived afterward, taking away the body of the activist.

In regards to the Americas, after the adoption of the Final Peace Accord in 2016, **Colombia** has received increased attention by the UNSC. At the Open Debate on WPS in 2021, Celia Umenza Velasco, a member of the Association of Indigenous Councils of the North of Cauca, briefed the UNSC. She recognized the diversity of women in Colombia and brought the attention of the Council to violence targeting women in the peace process. In fact, Colombia tops the list when it comes to PVTWIP incidents tracked by ACLED in recent years. Such incidents of violence have increased from 2019 to 2021 – pointing to a growing threat in the country. For example, on 20 April 2021, in Pescador, Cauca, unidentified armed individuals shot dead an Indigenous woman leader.

Finally, there are a number of European states that have received the attention of the UNSC. We here look more closely at the situation in **Ukraine**. While this country is not officially on the UNSC agenda, the situation in the country has been repeatedly discussed in informal UNSC contexts. In Ukraine, women activists are those primarily targeted, often via non-sexual attacks at the hands of anonymous armed agents. For example, on 18 January 2020, an unidentified individual attacked an anti-corruption activist in front of her apartment in Varash, Rivne.

Conclusions

The UNSC Open Debate on Protecting Participation underlines the nexus between these core WPS themes and highlights the importance of both sharpening the knowledge and the capacity of the UNSC in order to support women's full, equal, and meaningful

participation in processes toward peace. Women's security concerns often stem from their involvement in political processes, as demonstrated by research that finds that, with women's increased political representation, political violence targeting women also increases.⁵ Moreover, the groups of women that are targeted, the form political violence takes, and who the perpetrators are vary from context to context. In order to prescribe effective protective measures, the UNSC must adapt its decisions to the actual situation on the ground. The UNSC has started this process. Tracking of WPS language integration into UNSC resolutions during 2021 indicates that protection and participation language is increasingly positioned in relation to each other, indicating an important move by the UNSC to address the nexus problem.⁶ This is critical for the way forward and needs to be followed up through additional resources and accountability of peace operations and states to respond and prevent – a process in which the concerned women need to be closely involved. As articulated by Norway's Foreign Minister at the Open Debate, it is a false trade-off to position women's security and participation in opposition to each other. ■

ACLED

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) collects real-time data on the locations, dates, actors, fatalities, and types of all reported political violence and protest events around the globe.

ACLED is the highest quality, most widely used, real-time data and analysis source on political violence and protest in the world.

Practitioners, researchers, and governments depend on ACLED for the latest reliable information on current conflict and disorder patterns. For more information, see <https://acleddata.com>.

THE PROJECT

This brief is based on ACLED's work around political violence targeting women in politics (PVTWIP). For more information on definitions, methodology, and what the data can and cannot be used for, see Kishi, Roudabeh (2021) 'Violence Targeting Women in Politics: Trends in Targets, Types, and Perpetrators of Political Violence'. ACLED. 8 December.

Notes

1. United Nations (2021) 'Women in leadership "must be the norm", Security Council hears'. UN News. 21 October. Available at: news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1103662.
2. Louise Olsson (Forthcoming) 'Peacekeeping operations and women's security'. In: Han Dorussen (ed.) *Handbook on Peacekeeping and International Relations*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
3. Roudabeh Kishi (2021) 'Violence Targeting Women in Politics: Trends in Targets, Types, and Perpetrators of Political Violence'. ACLED. 8 December. Available at: acleddata.com/2021/12/08/violence-targeting-women-in-politics-trends-in-targets-types-and-perpetrators-of-political-violence; and Olsson (Forthcoming).
4. Clionadh Raleigh; Andrew Linke; Håvard Hegre & Joakim Karlsen (2010) 'Introducing ACLED: an armed conflict location and event dataset: special data feature'. *Journal of Peace Research* 47(5): 651–660.
5. Hilary Matfess; Roudabeh Kishi & Marie Berry (Forthcoming) 'No Safety in Numbers: Political Representation and Political Violence Targeting Women in Kenya'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*.
6. Patty Chang; Louise Olsson & Anna Marie Obermeier (2021) *Women, Peace and Security in the UN Security Council: Tracking and analyzing the integration of WPS language in Council resolutions, September–November 2021*. Internal report. Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).

THE AUTHORS

Roudabeh Kishi is Director of Research & Innovation at ACLED, where she leads data collection, research and analysis, including on political violence targeting women.

Louise Olsson is a Research Director and the Coordinator of the Gender Research Group at PRIO.

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.