



ROOTING OUT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS (VAWIP)

A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION



In February 2024, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD Uganda) in collaboration with Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA) convened the 2nd National Youth Symposium, themed “Redefining Governance and Political Inclusivity in Uganda”. The symposium is a platform for Ugandan youth to deliberate on key themes shaping the political landscape in the country. In particular, this symposium focused on the aspirations of young people ahead of the 2026 elections, gender-based violence in politics and electoral and governance systems in Uganda. This brief is based on the panel discussions on Rooting out violence against women in politics.

The United Nations General Assembly in 1981, instituted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The framework is an international treaty adopted and ratified by over 189 states, including African countries. regional and national levels, these include; the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights as well as Agenda 2063, the 2011 UN General Assembly resolution on women’s political participation (A/RES/66/130); and the recently held Generation Equality Forum. While there is an array of legal and policy frameworks that have been put in place to promote women’s participation in politics, there has been little effort to address violence against women in politics.

WHAT IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS (VAWIP)?

Violence against women in politics is a form of gender-based violence which targets women and girls participating in politics at all levels. This is any act, or threat, of physical, sexual or psychological violence that prevents women from exercising and realizing their political rights and a range of human rights. Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) manifests in specific, gendered ways including, but not limited to, the following examples.



- 1. Physical violence:** including assassinations, kidnappings, and beatings – often with the intent to force women to resign or withdraw from political life.
- 2. Sexual violence:** including sexual harassment, unwanted advances and sexual assault, rape, sexualized threats, altered pornographic or sexualized images intended to publicly question women’s competence and shame them.
- 3. Psychological violence:** including threats, character assassination, stalking, and online abuse as well as economic violence such as denial of salary or political financing, property theft or damage



Violence against women during elections (VAW-E). VAW-E is not explicitly included in the list of election offences under electoral laws and regulations, nor is it strongly recognized in the laws on GBV.



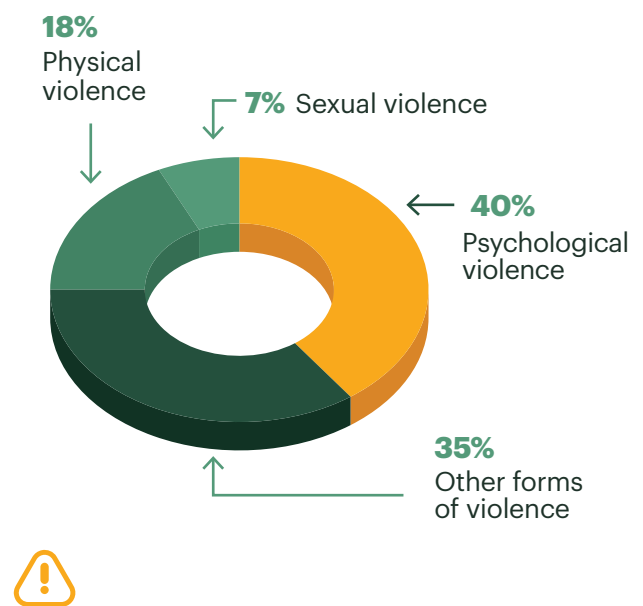
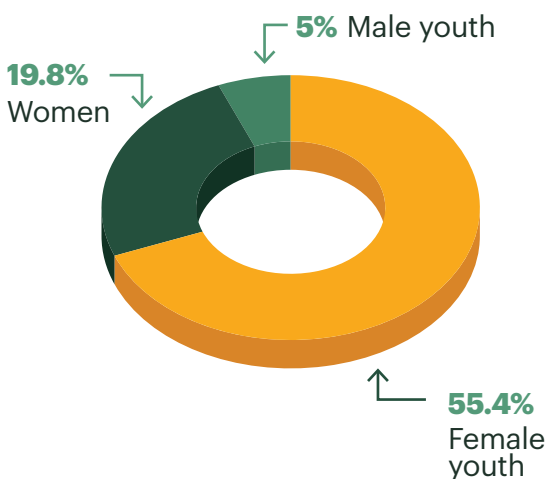
PREVALENCE OF VAWIP IN UGANDA

VAWP in politics constitutes a formidable barrier to women's meaningful active participation and leadership roles within the political sphere. Tackling GBV in politics is not only a matter of justice but is also imperative for fostering an inclusive political environment that encourages the active involvement of women in shaping the political landscape. For example; a study commissioned by Akina Mama wa Afrika in 2021 titled "Accelerating Women's Political Participation in Uganda" revealed the challenges women and girls face in politics in Uganda. The study found that 27.5% of respondents had experienced violence within political parties, the most reported were unwanted sexual advances (27.1%) and hostile work environment or harassment (11.9%).

In addition, a study report by Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) 'Deterred not Barred: Unmasking Violence Against Women in the 2016 General Elections in Uganda' revealed that Violence Against Women in Elections (VAW-E) is a key deterrent to women's free participation in public life and greatly undermines their civil rights¹.

The FOWODE report revealed that violence against women during the 2016 general elections occurred mainly in psychological, physical, and sexual forms, adversely affecting women physically, emotionally, and socially. Psychological violence was the most dominant at 40% followed by other forms of violence at 35%, physical violence at 18% and sexual violence at 7%.

The most harassed members of the political parties that participated in the study were female youth (55.4%), and women (19.8%). Others experiencing this nature of harassment are male youth (5%). The results also show that 58% of the respondents reported that sexual harassment was a problem in their political parties.



Psychological violence is also exemplified by the widespread use of social sanctions and punishment defined by patriarchal norms.

¹ FOWODE (2018), Deterred not Barred: Unmasking Violence Against Women in the 2016 General Elections in Uganda



In recognition of the need to address structural barriers to women’s political participation, in 2018 the UN General Assembly in its Resolution 73/148 expressed that it was “deeply concerned about all acts of violence, including sexual harassment, against women and girls involved in political and public life, including women in leadership positions, journalists and other media workers and human rights defenders.” It called specifically upon national legislative authorities and political parties to adopt zero-tolerance codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms or to revise existing ones².

The international normative framework places States as the key actors responsible for addressing VAWP, as they have a duty to prevent, investigate and punish all acts of VAW prohibited under international human rights standards³. Regional instruments, human rights bodies and other mechanisms similarly hold States accountable. It falls within the respective mandates of State actors to create and carry out normative, legislative, judicial, and institutional actions to enable, initiate and implement solutions to VAWP.

No actor alone, however, can eliminate VAWP completely. Cooperation between State and key non-State stakeholders including political parties, the media, independent human rights monitoring mechanisms and civil society groups is important and necessary given their interdependence and intersecting mandates⁴.

As Feminists, promoting gender and social justice requires interrogating the systems of oppression which facilitate forces of violence against women and girls. These include but limited to; questioning capitalism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy.

The domination, discrimination, dehumanization, and lack of dignity of African women are caused by these systems, and these continue to play a role in undermining the progress of democracy on the continent. Violence against women is caused by gender inequality – including unequal power relations between women and men, rigid gender roles, norms and hierarchies, and ascribing women to lower status in society. Promoting and achieving gender equality is a critical element of the prevention of violence against women.



² United Nations (2018), Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2018 73/148, Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: sexual harassment, A/RES/73/148.

³ United Nations (2018), Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on violence against women in politics, A/73/301

⁴ UN Women (2021), Guidance Note: Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics



RECOMMENDATIONS



Address power imbalance as a core element of tackling violence against women in politics at the political party level and the country at large.



Develop, implement, and monitor gender-responsive legal and policy frameworks within political parties and at a national level intended to detect, prevent, and redress VAW to expand women's space and opportunity to effectively participate in politics.



Increase public education campaigns throughout the electoral cycle aimed at curbing and addressing VAW at various stages of the electoral process and in politics in general. This massive civic education should be customised for specific target groups and stakeholders.



Develop a robust monitoring and reporting system for VAW, making it safe for women and other vulnerable groups to report and break the silence. Evidence gathering and research is a crucial early step in addressing VAWP.. It helps document women's experiences, determine the magnitude of violence, types of violence, victims, perpetrators, and locations, as well as indicate what contexts pose greater risk to women.



Regulate use of money during elections by either enacting and implementing an Elections Expenses Act or amending the Political Parties and Organisations Act, to regulate campaign financing to help alleviate the challenges that women and other marginalized persons face due to limited financial resources. A special fund should be set up to support women with limited financial resources and women leagues should be strengthened through funding and technical support.

This issue brief has been produced as part of the Power of Dialogue (PoD) programme which seeks to enhance the effectiveness of political and civic actors to influence political processes. The programme is being implemented across Africa, America and Asia in the following countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Mozambique, Sudan, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Guatemala, Colombia and Myanmar by a consortium steering group comprising of Akina Mama wa Afrika, Center for the Mediterranean and International Studies, Gorée Institute: Center for Democracy, Development, and Culture in Africa, and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy.





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