

Ending Violence Against Women in Politics (Congressional Briefing)
Tuesday, March 21, 2017 - 3:00-4:00pm
SVC-215 Capitol Visitor Center, Washington, DC

Remarks - Begoña Lasagabaster

- Thank you Representatives McGovern, Hultgren, Schakowsky, and distinguished members of the Lantos Commission, and esteemed fellow panelists.
- I am grateful for the opportunity to present here today to **shed light on a growing phenomenon** that deserves attention and action in every part of the world.
- Violence Against Women in Politics is **very much on the agenda** of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
- We are working with partners across the UN System, with global partners such as IPU, as well as with the academic community, to **break the silence** on this very real issue, and **advance a new field of research programming**.
- I **testify** today not only as a representative of UN Women...
 - ...but also as **a former member of parliament** who has seen far too many women pay a higher price to be in public life, just because they are women.
- My remarks today focus on **3 questions**:
 - **What is violence** against women in politics?
 - **Why is it important** to the international policy-making community?
 - **What are we doing** about it?
- **And a call to action** – to raise awareness and support efforts to end it.

1. What is violence against women in politics?

- We have heard about the impact on women parliamentarians, but **violence against women cuts across all areas of political participation.**
- **UN Women defines** violence against women in politics as:
 - *“any act or threat of gender-based violence, resulting in **physical, sexual, psychological** harm or suffering to women, that prevents them from exercising and realizing their political rights.”*
- The **victims** are women candidates and aspirants, voters, political supporters and activists, election workers, observers and public officials.
- The **perpetrators** can be political parties, youth groups, religious leaders, police, military, members of the victim’s own family, and the media.
 - [For example], members of political parties may inflict harassment or violence on women in the party, to prevent her candidacy. By denying her campaign resources, meeting in hours when she is tending to family care responsibilities to make decisions about her nomination...
 - [For example], when **the media** disparages women by degrading or humiliating women candidates or elected officials based on their dress, appearance, lifestyle choices, etc., it **lays the groundwork for violence against women in politics** by implanting negativity and bias. We know that **online social media is a fertile ground for sexual harassment** – one report says women are 27 times more likely to be abused online than men¹ – and many women politicians, including from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, among others, are starting to speak out.
- And violence against women in politics **occurs in public or private spaces**, including over:
 - the **right to vote and hold public office**
 - to **vote in secret** and to **freely campaign**
 - to **associate and assemble**, and
 - to enjoy **freedom of opinion and expression.**
- From **verbal harassment**, to **character assassination**, to **death and rape threats**, to online **trolling**, to **denial of campaign resources**, **sexual coercion** for votes...these **cannot be the consequences** of casting ballots, running for office, or serving the public.
- There are **more women politicians today than ever before in history – over 10,700 at the national level, and millions at the local level.**
- And **still**, we are **far short of gender balance** in decision-making

¹ UN Women, UNDP and ITU, 2015. *Cyber Violence against Women and Girls: A World-Wide Wake-Up Call*, report by The UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group.

- The growing presence of women in political life - perceived as being **at odds with women's traditional gender roles** - poses a **threat to traditional power relations**.

2. **Why is it a matter of importance to the international policy-making community?**

- **Violence**, therefore, is **intended to purposefully keep women from voting, standing as candidates and staying in office**. It is a human rights violation, as it prevents women from realizing their political rights.
- The issue is very real, but has remained in the **margins of study and policy** due to a **lack of data**, and the **stigma** attached to gender-based violence in many societies.
- Unfortunately, **traditional Violence Against Women measurements have omitted the political sphere**, possibly because the scope of violence against women in politics was less than it is today, or because there was less public acknowledgement.
 - But there are **efforts and opportunities at international and national levels** that give us scope to give this issue the attention and action it deserves.

3. **Which brings me to my last question - what are we doing about it?**

- Violence against women is **growing** all over the world. We need to do more to **measure it, prevent it and respond to it**.
- There are **several ways we can do this. I will list 6.**

(1) Legal and Policy reform - in **Latin America**, many countries have pursued **laws** that deal exclusively with violence against women in politics:

- **Bolivia** is the only country in the world to pass such legislation - the 2012 Law against the Harassment of and Political Violence against Women – after heightened awareness of political violence against women following the assassination of Councilwoman Juana Quispe.
- But **Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador and Peru** have all draft laws that either specifically address violence against women in politics, or expand existing legislation on ending violence against women to include this form of violence.

(2) Parliamentary action, including the adoption or amendment of rules of procedures, to ensure that women don't face harassment and violence in parliamentary work and debate. Here we also look to the excellent work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

(3) Mapping and Measuring the problem - we need **ample and adequate data** to fully measure the problem and influence evidenced-based policy responses.

- This includes **working through the traditional and existing Violence Against Women frameworks and surveys** to enhance knowledge and action in the political sphere.
- There are opportunities presented by **the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development** and its accompanying Sustainable Development Goals (**SDGs**).
- For example, **Targets 5.2 and 11.7** refer to violence in public spaces. Public office may be suggested as one of the places of occurrence of violence to be explored, and this may provide an opportunity to include measurements in the political sphere.
- **(4) Preventing and Mitigating violence against women in politics through Electoral Arrangements** – this includes integrating the awareness and response mechanisms into all aspects of election administration
- **(5) Working with Political Parties** – parties have a key responsibility. Legislated codes of conduct are one way to mitigate prevalence.
- **And (6) Raising Awareness.** This **violence is real**, and it is **growing**. We must **name** it. We must **confront** it. We must **end** it.
- I thank you.