

Politically-Motivated Sexual Violence: An Unforeseen Consequence of Gender Quotas

The increasing number of gender quotas implemented worldwide and subsequent dramatic surge of women in politics have had positive implications for gender equity worldwide. However, this legislation has also had an unexpected consequence: a rise in violence against women in politics. Action must be taken, by the international community as well as by countries negotiating with this issue, in order to ensure that women in the public sphere remain safe from violence, without undoing advances to the progression of women in global politics.

Scope of the Problem

The rise in international attention on gender quotas increased substantially after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The platform for action developed at the Conference emphasized the goal of “having 30 per cent of women in positions at decision-making levels by 1995” noting that in 1995, only 10 percent of legislative body positions were held by women.¹ Following the Beijing Conference, interest in women’s governance grew and gender quotas, seen as a natural mechanism by which women’s political participation could increase, became standard legislative tools and policy recommendations.

The increase of women in political and social leadership positions is undoubtedly a success. However, this increase has been accompanied by some problematic consequences. Women in the public sphere, whether in official political office or participating in the public sphere through their social or cultural leadership, appear to be at greater risk.² Reports of physical attacks, sexual violence, threats, and murders of public officials, particularly women, have increased substantially. It appears that this is not a coincidence; the growing number of women in the public sphere has threatened existing male political dominance, and some men are resorting to violence as a result.

The statistics on politically-motivated violence, and in particular, politically-motivated sexual violence, are unreliable. Violence against women is an underreported issue worldwide, sexual violence even more so. Though it is nearly impossible to accurately pinpoint the number of cases globally, or even in a particular country, in-country experts have provided insights into the presence, or lack thereof, of violence against public and political officials.

Manifestations of Politically-Motivated Sexual Violence in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe

¹ United Nations. *Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women.*, 27 October 1995.

² Noble, Rachel, and Daphne Jayasinghe, *Fearless: Standing with Women and Girls to End Violence*, ActionAid, June 2015, Web.

It appears that there is a link between dramatic increases in women's politicization and politically-motivated violence. Gender quotas, though not the only means of rapid politicization, often encourage significant increases in women entering the public sphere, either as candidates or political leaders. African countries are some of the most likely to have implemented gender quotas after the 1995 Beijing Conference, due to regional agreements as well as implicit and explicit pressures from neighbours.³

Zimbabwe, Kenya, and South Africa are among the 40 countries in Africa that have some form of voluntary or legislated gender quotas.⁴ In each of these countries, in the last 15 years, activists, protesters, candidates, and/or political officials have been victimized seemingly as a result of their political activities. In Zimbabwe, several non-profits recently published that the government "is systematically deploying the most brutal forms of sexual violence to deter women" from participating in "opposition activities."⁵ Kenyan women vying for public office are subjugated to assault so often, that some female politicians refer to such attacks as a "rites of passage."⁶ Finally, in South Africa, members of a men's rights group, Isichelo Samadoda ("Men's Cry"), has sexually assaulted women over dissatisfaction with laws that favour women.⁷

Impacts of Politically-Motivated Sexual Violence

Politically-motivated sexual violence is a highly relevant, international issue. The UN, a large supporter of gender quotas, advocates 30% of decision-making positions be held by women, a critical mass believed necessary for women to significantly impact political decision-making processes. If such a policy, when implemented quickly and without supporting policies that emphasize education, civil society support, and judicial infrastructure, is contributing to violence against women, it is not merely antithetical to United Nations goals, but contributing to a dangerous environment for women worldwide. Additionally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that government authority is based on "the will of the people, as expressed through periodic and genuine elections."⁸ If political candidates are dissuaded from running for office or voters fearful of voting in elections, elections can neither be considered genuine nor based on the will of the people. Politically-motivated sexual violence is a matter of international concern especially, though not exclusively, if gender quotas are, in fact, a contributing cause.

³ Data obtained through the Quota Project (IDEA).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Targeting Women in Zimbabwe, 2011 Democracy Digest <<http://www.demdigest.net/targeting-women-in-zimbabwe>>.

⁶ Interview with Nabila at Femnet, Nairobi, 22 July 2015.

⁷ Interview with Tabisa at Commission for Gender Equality, Cape Town, 31 August 2015.

⁸ UDHR.

Policy Recommendations

Few governments or international institutions recognize politically-motivated sexual violence as an issue, let alone have policies designed to combat the problem. Transnational non-profits, some of the few institutions to take note of this issue, have focused their efforts on documentation and immediate treatment rather than understanding the underlying causes and seeking to prevent violence from occurring.

Some may suggest that since gender quotas and the rapid increase of women in the public sphere are strongly linked, countries should abolish quotas and instead seek a gradual rise of women in politics. I firmly disagree. Though there appears to be a correlation, gender quotas and women in politics are not the problem; patriarchal attitudes about the role of women in society, impunity for violence against women, and repressive governance are the true roots of the issue. In addition, women's groups have worked to support female leaders and mitigate risks to their safety by creating women's caucuses, running training programs for women in leadership positions, and publishing instances when they occur to encourage public knowledge and increase the likelihood of public shaming.

Following my research, I call on the international community to do the following:

- Acknowledge politically-motivated sexual violence as a problem endemic in many countries.
- Continue to support gender quotas, but with complementary policies that encourage the:
 - o Mitigation of judicial impunity for sexual violence and assault crimes
 - o Education for political and military elites
 - o Civil society cohesion around women's rights.
- Support women once they are in political office.

Support for these efforts, by the international community and affected countries, could significantly improve the abilities of women to safely participate in the public sphere.