

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

## The #NotTheCost Campaign: An Academic-Practitioner Collaboration

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In March 2015, we met in a café in New York City with a colleague, Caroline Hubbard, to talk about violence against women in politics. Sandra had recently started a position as head of the Gender, Women, and Democracy team with Caroline at the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Mona, a women and politics professor at Rutgers University, had attended a panel organized by NDI on violence against women in elections in Africa, informed by NDI's incipient work in this area. Some weeks earlier, she had been at an expert group meeting arranged by the Inter-American Commission of Women on violence against women in politics in Latin America. The previous year, she had participated in a roundtable cohosted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Government of Ireland, where violence was identified by panelists as a growing challenge to women's ability to participate fully and equally in political life.

At our meeting, we noted the cross-regional nature of this phenomenon and decided to work together on a global effort to stop violence against women in politics. The #NotTheCost campaign was officially launched a year later, in March 2016, by the late Madeleine Albright, NDI chair and former U.S. secretary of state.<sup>1</sup> Over those 12 months, we worked together to write a concept note, apply for funding, and organize a two-day international roundtable with political women, academic researchers, and democratic governance practitioners. From the outset, we had two key concerns. The first was to find a persuasive way of framing the issue, which was often dismissed as simply “the cost of doing politics.” The #NotTheCost slogan rejects this logic, insisting that violence should *not* be the cost of women's political participation. Our second goal was to offer tangible solutions for actors seeking to make politics safer for women. To this end, we issued a Global Call to Action, defining the issue, explaining its importance, and identifying a wide range of interventions that might be taken by

different actors at the international, national, and local levels. In this note, we share what we did and what we learned from this ongoing collaboration.

## What Did We Do?

Over the last eight years, our partnership has evolved as we have grappled, both separately and together, with the issue of violence against women in politics. For us, “women in politics” has always referred to women serving in a variety of political roles: activists, advocates, party members, political candidates, elected representatives at any level, and members of executive office, among others. Following the launch of the Global Call to Action, we worked together on an article for the *Journal of Democracy*, with the aim of reaching beyond the gender and politics community to draw attention to violence against women in politics as a threat to democracy, not just gender equality (Krook 2017). NDI then began a multiyear project creating a suite of tools and methodologies for collecting data and responding to and preventing violence, including *No Party to Violence*, on violence against women in political parties (National Democratic Institute 2018); *Tweets That Chill*, on online violence against women in politics (National Democratic Institute 2019); *think10*, a tool that political women can use to enhance their safety as they go about their political activities;<sup>2</sup> and *Addressing Online Misogyny and Gendered Disinformation*, on gendered implications of state-based disinformation (National Democratic Institute 2021a). Mona wrote the compendium report for *No Party to Violence*, distilling NDI’s research with 25 parties in Côte d’Ivoire, Honduras, Tanzania, and Tunisia, presenting the first systematic data and analysis of the types, levels, and impact of violence against women within parties. She served as a technical adviser on the other tools, participating in a number of NDI forums and workshops and providing feedback on the country-level research.

During this time, we also worked together on strategic relationship-building to generate visible momentum for global debates on violence against women in politics. In 2016 and 2017, we met with Dr. Dubravka Šimonović, at that time the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, who subsequently announced that she would address the topic of violence against women in politics during her mandate. In 2018, we contributed to an expert group meeting, informing the Special Rapporteur’s first ever report on the topic to the UN General Assembly later that year. In early 2020, Catherine Wineinger, a recent Rutgers PhD, reached out to us from the office of U.S. Representative Rashida Tlaib, where she was serving as an American Political Science Association Congressional Fellow, to discuss actions they might take to advance debates on violence against women in politics in the United States. A few weeks later, Representative Tlaib made a one-minute speech on the floor of Congress, standing next to a #NotTheCost sign. Her office later invited us to comment on drafts of House Resolution 1151, introduced that September (and reintroduced a year later) by Representatives Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Jackie Speier (joined in 2021 by Representative Cori Bush) (see Catherine N. Wineinger’s essay in this section).

Our collaboration also inspired Mona to write a book on violence against women in politics, based on insights from a wide range of academic disciplines but also deeply informed by interviews and workshops with democracy practitioners and politically active women around the world. Written for academics and practitioners, the book traces the global emergence of the concept, illustrates what it looks like in practice, catalogues emerging solutions around the world, and considers how to document this phenomenon more effectively (Krook 2020). When the book was published in September 2020, NDI volunteered to host a virtual book launch in two sessions scheduled to capture different time zones. We drew on our respective networks to invite senior political women in Australia, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan, Sweden, and the United Kingdom to offer remarks. In 2022, *Violence against Women in Politics* received the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order, honoring solution-oriented work in political science on issues of world importance.

Five years after the launch of the #NotTheCost campaign, we reconvened to discuss how to mark the occasion. In rereading the Global Call to Action, we were struck by the fact that many of the actions we had listed—which were mainly hypothetical at the time—had been implemented in countries around the globe. We also noted that additional solutions had been devised by actors at all levels. Therefore, we re-drafted the document as a Renewed Call to Action (National Democratic Institute 2021b), reflecting advancements in debates as well as actions to mitigate violence against women in politics. One of the single biggest shifts was growing attention to the use of online violence and the weaponization of disinformation against political women. In addition to Secretary Albright, NDI recruited a number of high-profile allies to participate in an online anniversary event in March 2021, including Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer, Filipina journalist and 2021 Nobel laureate Maria Ressa, and former Swedish cabinet minister and UN Women deputy director Åsa Regnér. In five short years, the campaign had thus resonated with a wide range of audiences who agreed that violence should *not* be the cost of women's political participation.

### What Did We Learn?

Our close and sustained collaboration over the last eight years has yielded five observations about the successful bridging of theory and practice. First, *working principles are good*. We agreed from the beginning that we would privilege what women in politics told us. As research shows, women who open up about their experiences of violence are often not believed, or their voices are discounted, by the broader public (Gilmore 2017). Women's testimonies thus became a key feature of our publications and public-facing events, informing our frameworks while also making the phenomenon more tangible and urgent to observers. We also insisted that the work be grounded in a feminist understanding of gender and power, expanding traditional definitions of political violence and aligning with the broader international movement to stop all violence against women. Finally, we committed to being action- and solution-oriented. In addition to framing the issue of violence against women in politics, we wanted to go

beyond noting the problem to emphasize the many ways to take action to stop it.

Second, *the best partners are equally strong*. Academics and practitioners bring different skills and priorities to the table. In our case, developing the concept of “violence against women in politics” balanced political science interests in concept formation (Sartori 1970) with activist concerns to name and politicize problems that are unarticulated and overlooked (Friedan 1963). Our goal became the search for a concept that, as Mona described it, would be both “theoretically rigorous and politically convincing.” At the most basic level, we faced a challenge in deciding whether to use the word “violence,” which is both a contested term in academia and one that does not garner full consensus among actors in society. In the end, our interactions with political women on the ground persuaded us to reject the limitations of existing work on political violence, focused primarily on physical force targeting political opponents. Instead, we privileged feminist research and advocacy, an approach which expanded the range of relevant acts and highlighted forms of violence specifically linked to being a woman in political spaces. This choice also enabled us to stress that violence against women in politics was not limited to one area of the globe—but, like violence against women more generally—was experienced by women across diverse contexts.

Third, it is important to *make something(s) new*. Since 2014, we have engaged with colleagues in both academic and practitioner spaces on the concept and how best to measure it. In this relatively short time, knowledge of violence against women in politics has expanded dramatically, in terms of data collection as well as public debates on this issue.<sup>3</sup> As a team, we have sought to “add value” to these evolving developments in a number of ways. In 2016, we proposed that violence against women in politics has three distinct characteristics: it targets women because of their gender, its form can be gendered, and its impact is to discourage women in particular from being or becoming politically active (National Democratic Institute 2016). In 2018, we collaborated on a report to document violence against women in political parties (National Democratic Institute 2018). Despite indications that violence by copartisans is among the most common forms of violence against women in politics (Centre for Social Research and UN Women 2014), it remains almost unstudied in the emerging literature. And, in 2021, we published a Renewed Global Call to Action, which catalogues initiatives around the world to combat violence against women in politics, with the hopes of inspiring actors in other contexts to follow suit (National Democratic Institute 2021b).

Fourth, *synchronize your watches*. Finding time to work together poses perhaps the greatest practical challenge for scholar-practitioner collaborations. Academic research can take months and even years to complete, through an iterated process of data collection, analysis, writing, and peer review. At the same time, scholars often have a host of other day-to-day professional responsibilities connected to teaching, service, and other research projects. Practitioners, in comparison, face tight funding deadlines and often must work around the political calendar—with, for example, elections determining the timing of programs and research dissemination. For us, the work coalesced around three main moments, rather than reflecting a steady investment over time. The first phase took place from March 2015 to March 2016, when we conceived of the

campaign, brought colleagues from both our fields to discuss it, and launched #NotTheCost in New York. The second moment of heavy collaboration occurred between January and October 2018, when NDI was building out its portfolio of research and tools and Mona was on a research fellowship to write her book. We collaborated on a report, which involved data collection by NDI and analysis and writing by Mona, and participated in a series of events, including an expert group meeting culminating in the UN Special Rapporteur's report to the UN General Assembly. The third stage occurred in the run-up to the fifth anniversary of the #NotTheCost campaign, as we cultivated the support of high-profile allies and developed the Renewed Call to Action.

Fifth, *ask what is in it for all parties*. Although scholars are often discouraged from doing policy-oriented work, engaging with practitioners can vastly improve academic research. In addition to pointing to new questions, exposure to the “real world” perspectives of practitioners can illuminate the limits of academic theory and interpretation. Practitioners, for their part, are not always aware of, or have access to, scholarly research—with work stuck behind a paywall or inaccessible in other ways, for example, because of the use of excessive jargon. Partnering with scholars can open up access to this larger body of work, in turn enhancing the rigor of practitioner reports while also potentially informing better evidence-based programming. In our case, working with NDI gave Mona privileged access to the voices and experiences of political women on the ground, as well as the reflections of NDI staff as they conducted research and developed programs. These interactions influenced not only how she thought about the issue, but also shaped decisions about the content and format of her book. For NDI, collaborating with Mona helped with developing definitions as well as the broader framing of the campaign, drawing on a wide range of academic literatures in political science and other disciplines.

## Final Reflections

Our collaboration on the #NotTheCost campaign has fundamentally shaped how we think, both individually and collectively, about the problem of violence against women in politics. While we do not agree on every aspect of this question, our partnership has encouraged us to strengthen our frameworks and arguments—making us, hopefully, better academics and practitioners. An unintended consequence is that we also became great friends—which is maybe not surprising, given that we care deeply about the same issues and share many of the same values. The potential gains of collaboration can thus also be personal, not merely professional, helping us find kindred spirits in the fight for greater gender equality and more resilient democracy.

## Notes

1. See <https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>.
2. See <https://think10.demcloud.org/about>.
3. See <https://www.vawpolitics.org/>.

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