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Taking collective action on violence, online and offline, against women in politics and elections

Summary note for the Democracy Action Partnership at the Bali Civil Society and Media Forum (BCSMF) 2023

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Authors and Contributors: Emmanuel Onuoha, Cecillia Makonyola, Magdalena Randall-Schab, Chompunut Chaliebun, Phetmany Xaychaleune, Nai-chia Chen, Sekar Panuluh, Annouchka Wijesinghe, Hannah Bowley, Felicity Hermann, Naomi Barnard, and Matthew Hedges

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DISCLAIMER

The content of this briefing paper reflects the discussions and recommendations put forth by participants of WFD's inaugural [Democracy Action Partnership](#) (DAP), which took place on 29–30 November 2023 in Bali, Indonesia. These represent important contributions to efforts towards equality of political participation but do not represent the full extent of WFD's programming and policy work on women's political leadership, more of which can be found on [our website](#).

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Introduction

The Democracy Action Partnership (DAP) is an official side event to the annual Bali Civil Society and Media Forum and biennial Bali Democracy Forum. In 2023, the two-day convening was held on 29th and 30th November 2023 and explored how regional stakeholders could take collective action to address Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP), so that women can meaningfully and safely participate in democracy and elections. It took place during the [16 days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence](#).

Objective

The DAP intends to facilitate a recurring locally-led, action-oriented dialogue on democratic governance and renewal that builds a long-term strategic partnership for the UK in the region. The annual event was in 2023 conceived and hosted by Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) in coordination with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Each year the DAP will platform collective troubleshooting on emergent democratic priorities, as defined by WFD programmes and partners in the region.

2023 Workshop Aims

- a. Strengthened dialogue and relationships between strategic stakeholders in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region.
- b. Facilitated a shared understanding of links between gendered violence and anti-democracy trends.
- c. Developed coordinated responses to online and offline violence and related threats to democracy.

Themes

The DAP facilitates solution-focused discussion across a series of action dialogues. In 2023, the following were identified entry points for addressing VAWP and provided the themes for the action dialogues:

- a. Collecting and monitoring data on violence against women in politics and elections
- b. Online gendered disinformation as an early warning system for peace and security
- c. Impact of harmful narratives (including media) and norms on women's political participation
- d. Institutional safety - gender sensitivity in formal political spaces

Purpose of this Summary

The summary below provides an overall picture of the DAP to inform and stimulate further conversations and engagements on VAWP. It covers four key elements: the methodology and process of the dialogue, the convention and participants' perspectives for action, a summary of the four themes mentioned above, and the collective vision statements generated from the event.



Regional Convening for Action

The event brought together regional actors boasting diverse backgrounds and expertise. Each participant was specially selected for the specific contribution they could make to tackling VAWP, based on their experience and interest in the area, ensuring that the process would result in actionable recommendations and greater collective ownership across the region.

Notable women's political leaders, some of whom had lived experience of violence were in attendance with relevant allies, as were Special Advisers and officials from ministries of women and youth and election management and monitoring bodies. Intergovernmental partners led and participated in panel dialogues, and provided technical expertise to thematic dialogues, including UN Women and the Open Government Partnership. Organisational attendees included civil society organisations, media, research institutions and academics, and technology and social media platforms.

The convening was explicit in its intention to focus on generating solutions that actors could take forward as a region. The DAP achieved this through thematic dialogues and the mapping of collective resources (expertise, resources, opportunities) across participants.

WFD also initiated a call to action for addressing VAWP, to which many individuals and institutions responded with commitments to cross-sector collaboration and maximising the impact of regional-level action. These commitments reflect the crowdsourced vision statement from participants of the DAP.

Collective Vision Statement

If our democracies and elections were free from violence, our world would look very different...

Our elections would be aspirational and fun! Offering candidates from all parts of society an opportunity to enjoy their run for office. Women would not be seen as second choices and would receive equal support from parties and communities. Everyone would be informed and free to vote for the candidates and policies that they believe in, choosing leaders that represent the diversity of their views and voices.

Political discourse would be safer and lead to more constructive and collaborative dialogue. All genders would feel free to speak up and share their political views freely, without fear of judgement, bullying or being shouted down. Political debates would be characterised by deep reflection, challenging ideas, not polarising people. Our politicians would smile more, respect people's right to protest, and value its contribution to democracy.

The decisions made by leaders would reflect care for the planet and the people in it. Policies and decisions made by people who reflect the diversity of our identities and experiences, would result in more inclusive outcomes. Investments in care, health and greener economies would be prioritised and resources would be allocated more equitably, eradicating poverty. There would be lasting peace and little need for huge spending on security and defence.

Our society would be safer, more equitable and reflect our collective freedoms. All genders would be able to participate in the decisions affecting their lives from their households to the high office. People would be free to express all parts of their identities, authentically and safe in the knowledge that they would still have equitable access to services and opportunities. We would walk through the world and interact with each other, without fear of violence, living happier lives with more love in them. As regional stakeholders dedicated to fostering democratic sustainability, we envision a world transformed when our democracies and electoral processes are liberated from the scourge of violence against women.

The DAP Methodology

The DAP process is centered around a series of highly participatory action dialogues, that break down the overarching theme into more specific entry points, which are then deliberated over using futures methodologies for more directive discussion outcomes. In 2023, Casual Layered Analysis, also known as Iceberg Analysis, and Three Horizons were utilised. Action dialogues are supported expert panel discussions, preparatory reading, and plenary sessions which harvest the outcomes of the dialogues across participants and then map how all actors can support them. Participants are also invited to make commitments for further collaboration, should they wish, with the support of WFD, which commits to coordinating the follow up through its country teams.

Summary of the Discussions

Action Dialogue One: Collecting and monitoring data on Violence Against Women in Politics and elections

“In the realm of preventing violence against women, data collection stands as the cornerstone, illuminating paths towards a safer future”.

VAWP remains a major obstacle to women’s political participation and in the region, which primarily presents through coercion and online abuse. VAWP cases are underreported, due to victims’ fear of reprisal, and this makes understanding the nature and frequency of VAWP more challenging. Also, there is no common understanding of VAWP among stakeholders and across the region, resulting in some harmful statements or jokes being normalised and widely accepted. Challenges to availability and accessibility of data include: normalisation of violence in politics due to traditional patriarchal values, religious beliefs, cultural expectations on gender roles, and the persistent perception of women as inferior compared to men.

Recommendations:

- Election management bodies (EMBs) should strengthen their online VAWP monitoring capabilities, monitor VAWP throughout the electoral cycle and put in place anticipatory measures for the increase in VAWP during elections.
- CSOs and allies should work closely with religious leaders, whose close links within communities can be utilised to counter VAWP, as it will help foster community support for normalising the reporting of incidents of VAWP.
- Governments should explore with tech and social media companies how AI technology could be used to collect and monitor VAWP data, noting that AI can have both positive and negative impacts.
- Governments, CSOs, research institutions, EMBs, political parties and social media and tech should consider how they can share their resources and data on VAWP to build a more accurate picture of the scale and significance of it.
- Political parties should play a stronger role in addressing VAWP, for example by having and enforcing policies (including staff and member codes of conduct) with remedial actions for incidents of VAWP within their parties.

Action Dialogue Two: Online gendered disinformation as an early warning system for peace and security

“Peace flourishes where gendered disinformation finds no fertile ground”.

False and misleading gendered, and often sexualised, information and images are deliberately and disproportionately used to undermine politically active women and discourage them from participating in politics. Gendered disinformation is being weaponised and deliberately deployed as a political strategy to eliminate alternative and progressive voices that often call for more inclusive politics and equitable policies. Perpetrators range from citizens to political elites and authorities. This harmful phenomenon is underpinned by misogyny and patriarchal gendered norms and values as well as a business model of tech platforms that are using deep learning algorithms, which prioritise disseminating content with greater engagement. Addressing gendered disinformation would require revisiting current models that monetarise dissemination of false information. Gendered disinformation not only undermine democratic processes and values, but if not addressed, can give impetus for offline violence, divide communities and cause instability.

Recommendations:

- Government to implement robust legal measures to enforce laws to protect personal data and privacy, and hold tech companies accountable for misogynistic content and disinformation.
- Government, CSOs and tech to raise awareness of gender equality and digital literacy while incorporating AI for proactive misinformation detection and mitigation.
- Government and CSOs to foster inclusive education: integrate gender sensitivity and human rights education into formal and informal schooling to combat hate speech and violence against women. Develop technological tools to counter disinformation and incentivise gender-sensitive behaviour through financial incentives and rewards.
- CSOs, government and allies to establish support systems for victims of online harassment, particularly women journalists and politicians. This involves providing legal assistance, developing guidelines for responding to online harassment, and fostering collaboration between governments, media organisations, and civil society to ensure the safety and empowerment of women in digital spaces.

Action Dialogue Three: Impact of harmful narratives (including media) and norms on women's political participation

"We should raise the bar for women's quota in politics to 50% representation. Settling for 30% isn't enough and it was never successful".

In recent years, the South and Southeast Asian region has witnessed an increase in online negative political advertisements, online gender-based violence, targeted online attacks against women politicians especially those with progressive policies or political agendas, threats to women's autonomy, and the harmful use of generative AI against women. A few key factors that have contributed to these unfavourable developments include gender-biased generative AI, insufficient public support towards women who seek to take on leadership roles, insufficient and biased coverage of women politicians in the media, the lack of or insufficient legal frameworks that should provide affirmative actions for woman politicians, rise in conservatism and far-right ideologies, and political monopoly, among others. What the preferred future looks like is improved media literacy and reporting standards, stronger regional collaboration and support systems for women in politics, and digital mobilising campaigns against online abuse of women politicians.

Recommendations:

- Technology companies should work in partnership with women leaders and political parties to develop AI to monitor and build evidence-based data on harmful narratives against women in politics, with an alert system and rapid response. Governments should disclose this data for public awareness.
- Government and civil society should develop and rollout civic education programmes on media literacy and AI to empower netizens, programmes to address and challenge the rise of conservatism, and capacity building for young women politicians.
- Regional bodies should develop mechanisms for monitoring and documentation, changing narratives, literacy programmes, legal reform, develop alert systems, and multistakeholder collaboration with social media platforms.

Action Dialogue Four: Institutional safety - gender sensitivity in formal political spaces

“Women have more interesting topics to talk about than women’s rights. Violence against women in politics should be solved now so that future women leaders can focus on broader concerns like peace, security, economy, and more”.

In recent years there has been a marked increase in awareness of VAWP across the Asia-Pacific region. Steps taken to improve gender equality include increased visibility and numerical representation of women in politics and laws passed to counter VAWP. Yet this has not translated into a reduction in instances of VAWP. There has in fact been an increase in systematic misogynistic attacks, both physical and online, deterring especially young women from politics, which has potential long-term effects for the leadership of women and democracy more broadly. A strong trend can be identified of growing public commitment to tackling VAWP by political institutions, but there is weak fulfilment and implementation.

Recommendations:

- Multisectoral voter education is essential for sensitising electorates on VAWP, fostering awareness and empathy. Programmes should promote voter participation for political influence, educate on gender-based violence in politics, advocate gender sensitivity, and combat disinformation about women in political arenas.
- Politically-engaged young people and young politicians, who are at greater risk of anti-gender radicalisation and include the next generation of political leaders, should be engaged in gender equality initiatives. This could include: formal political institutions consultation or deeper involvement with youth groups, forums for youth wings, contributing to political party manifestos, strengthening youth wings (through legislation e.g. introducing term limits), and creating more opportunities, such as widening space for more women to be in positions of power.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

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