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'TERRIBLY AND TERRIFYINGLY NORMAL' POLITICAL VIOLENCE TARGETING WOMEN

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“[Those perpetrating violence] were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal ... this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.”

— Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women around the world are facing unprecedented levels of targeted political violence. New data on political violence targeting women collated by the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#) – in partnership with the [Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law](#) at The University of Texas at Austin – confirm that the threat of political violence towards women has grown, in particular over the past 18 months, and is currently at its highest level recorded since 2018.

These data offer a new tool to track politically motivated attacks on women over time and across countries; address a number of critical gaps left by the constellation of efforts over the years to monitor and assess political gender-based violence; and will also complement the range of essential past and ongoing initiatives.

‘Terribly and Terrifyingly Normal’: Political Violence Targeting Women introduces the new categorization added to the ACLED dataset and presents the first full analysis of data on political violence targeting women, as well as demonstrations predominantly featuring women. It unpacks key developments in political violence and demonstration activity involving women within the public sphere, ranging from war-time sexual violence and attacks on female politicians, to active repression of women engaged in political processes. It confirms expected patterns previously uncovered: women experience a high level of political violence during war; the report also reveals surprising new trends, including the disproportionate use of intervention and excessive force against demonstrations featuring women.

Top Trends

Political violence targeting women is increasing in the short term; there are twice as many such events reported during the first quarter of 2019 than during the first quarter of 2018:

- Women are frequently targeted where levels of organized violence are high, such as during conventional warfare. This includes groups targeting women in the course of or as a weapon of war, such as the targeting of female civilians by snipers in a contested territory. Both Syria and Somalia are indicative cases.
- However, even where levels of organized violence do not top the charts, women often still face high levels of targeting. This includes actors targeting females outside of conventional conflict, such as attempts by the state to enforce order through repression, or a mob targeting a woman accused of indecency. Burundi and Pakistan are indicative cases.

Political violence targeting women extends beyond sexual violence, which makes up only one-third of all violence targeting women events:

- Political violence targeting women takes a variety of forms and varies across region and context.
- Sexual violence, abductions/forced disappearances, and mob violence are all proportionally more common in violence targeting women than in political violence in which gender does not drive targeting choices.

- Non-sexual attacks targeting women are the most common form of violence targeting women. These non-sexual attacks -- such as attempted assassinations of female politicians, or repression by state forces -- account for 47% of violence targeting women, while sexual violence accounts for 34%.

Political violence tactics targeting women vary by region:

- Non-sexual attacks are the predominant way in which women are targeted in the Middle East, accounting for 82% of all events (e.g. in February 2019, pro-Houthi snipers targeted a civilian woman in Al Hudaydah in Yemen).
- Sexual violence is the leading type of violence targeting women in Africa, accounting for 42% of all violence targeting women on the continent (e.g. in April 2018, a Fulani militia raped a woman in Anambra, Nigeria over land issues). Sexual violence is also widespread in Southeast Asia, and makes up 36% of all violence targeting women there (e.g. in November 2010, a soldier raped a girl in Shan state, Myanmar).
- Mob violence makes up a third of all violence targeting women in South Asia, reflecting the prominence of mob violence more largely as a feature of the region's conflict landscape (e.g. in March 2019, a mob assaulted a married woman in Assam, India over an illicit affair by pouring kerosene oil on her and attempting to set her ablaze).
- Abductions and forced disappearances are comparatively more common in Africa relative to other regions, where they make up 10% of all political violence targeting women. The Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014 is a highly publicized example, spurring the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign.

Perpetrators of political violence targeting women also vary across regions:

- Anonymous armed groups have carried out the largest proportion of violence targeting women from the start of 2018 to the present. Violence against women by unidentified armed groups (UAGs) constitute one-third of such events over that time period.
 - UAGs are the primary perpetrators of this type of violence in Africa, and in Southeastern & Eastern Europe and the Balkans. This points to the importance of capturing violence involving these anonymous agents.
- Of identified and named groups, political militias¹ are responsible for the most violence targeting women in Africa; state forces carry out the largest proportion in the Middle East; and mobs, including those with links to political parties and religious groups, are the primary perpetrators in South Asia.

Demonstrations featuring women face disproportionate levels of excessive force:

- Demonstrations featuring women are on the rise; in nearly every region of ACLED coverage, the first quarter of 2019 featured record or near-record high levels of demonstration events featuring women.
 - 'Demonstrations featuring women' entail those in which demonstrators are made up entirely or a majority of women (e.g. a gathering of mothers of prisoners), a women's group (e.g. Women of Zimbabwe Arise [WOZA], the Free Women's Movement [TJA] in Turkey, or the All India Democratic Women's

¹ ACLED defines these groups as armed, organized political gangs, often acting on behalf of political elites.

² While women can also be included within the 'Strategic developments' event type within the ACLED coding structure, these events are limited in

Association [AIDWA]), or around women's rights specifically (e.g. women's reproductive rights, or policies around women's clothing).

- Across all regions, the vast majority of demonstration events (a category that includes non-violent public gatherings and violent demonstrations) featuring women are peaceful protests in which demonstrators do not engage in violence or vandalism and are not met with any intervention, by state forces or otherwise.
- However, higher proportions of demonstration events featuring women are met with excessive force (e.g. live fire) and intervention (e.g. arrests, tear gas) than demonstrations not featuring women, especially in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and across Africa. This intervention usually comes at the hands of the state.

The new data on political violence targeting women are publicly accessible via ACLED's website -- both through [the data export tool](#) as well as a [curated data file](#) -- and also via ACLED's [API](#) on a weekly basis, allowing users to monitor these trends in near-real-time for analysis, programming, early warning, advocacy, and more.

If you are an organization collecting information on political violence targeting women, or demonstrations featuring women, and are interested in a partnership with ACLED to help extend coverage of these threats to women further, please reach out to us at admin@acleddata.com.

I. INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

New data from the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#), in partnership with the [Strauss Center for International Security and Law at The University of Texas at Austin](#), point to increases in political violence targeting women. Political violence targeting women can occur during war-time, especially in the form of sexual violence; it can occur when women are running for office, or when exercising their right to vote while engaging in democratic processes. These new data suggest that violence targeting women varies in form, is prevalent in a variety of contexts, and is perpetrated by a number of different types of actors.

How are women targeted?

Academics and activists have often focused on war-time sexual violence and violence against women during elections. Political violence targeting women is not solely sexual in nature and is common even outside of war-time contexts. And, women can be targeted for showing political support of certain policies or platforms, even outside of election periods. They suffer violence within land-based altercations or other livelihood-based confrontations. Women can be targeted for engaging in public demonstrations around policies across countries and time periods. The motives for this violence are to create a high-risk political space; to humiliate and oppress women; to prevent the effective political participation of women; and to generally perpetuate an environment of high instability with violent consequences.

The forms of violence that can be deployed targeting women are similarly diverse. Women can be specifically targeted in physical attacks (both sexual and not), abducted or forcibly disappeared, or targeted by mobs. They can also be dispersed by government officials, other armed agents, or other violent demonstrators for engaging in public demonstrations, peaceful or otherwise.

These cases represent just some events in which women are the targets of political violence, and which are consistently overlooked in analyses of violence targeting women.

Coding structure of the data

The new categorization added into ACLED data captures political violence *targeting* women, as well as demonstrations featuring women, both during and outside of war-time contexts, and contentious contexts.. This violence and engagement can come in a variety of forms, including sexual violence, and other manifestations of physical violence, which fall under a number of different ‘sub-event types’ within the ACLED coding structure. These are described in the table below. (For more on ACLED coding methodology, see the [ACLED Codebook](#).) The figures below help to paint a picture of the landscape of violence and disorder that women face.²

To collect these data, ACLED notes ‘women’ as an *associate actor* to civilians and demonstrators (both peaceful protesters and violent rioters). While women can be perpetrators of violence in addition to the target, only targets are explored here

² While women can also be included within the ‘Strategic developments’ event type within the ACLED coding structure, these events are limited in number and should not be used for analysis in the same way as events capturing violence and demonstrations. This is because ‘Strategic developments’ events are not coded systematically and rather are context-specific; they are meant to offer users insight into the context of the political landscape, and include events such as arrests or looting/property destruction. (See [this ACLED methodology note](#) for more on ‘Strategic developments’ and how to use them in analysis.)

through this identity category. Per ACLED methodology, identity categories such as ethnic or religious groups are assumed peaceful and are only associate actors to civilians and demonstrators, not to armed groups.³

‘Women’ are coded as an *associate actor* when their gender is a salient identity in their targeting.⁴ Gender will not be the salient identity in every instance of political violence against women. Salient identities are not fixed in time and space; the intersectional nature of identities means that different aspects of one’s identity may be salient at different times, places, and contexts.⁵

This is not a gender disaggregation of the ACLED dataset. In line with ACLED’s coding of *associate actor* identity categories, women are only coded as the victim in events of violence targeting women if the victim(s) are made up entirely of women/girls, majority women/girls, or if the primary target was a woman/girl (e.g. a female politician attacked alongside two male bodyguards). This refers to cases of direct targeting (coded as event type ‘Violence against civilians’ or sub-event type ‘Mob violence’; in cases of violence as a result of explosions or remote violence, in which the targets of such violence have the potential of being more random, this rule is applied more conservatively, and only cases in which the targeting is more clear are included (e.g. a remote explosive targeting a girls’ school, or a grenade thrown at a female politician; cases such as an airstrike being dropped and 3 women and 1 man reported killed would not be coded as such given the more random targeting associated with that form of violence, despite the fact that a majority of the victims are women).

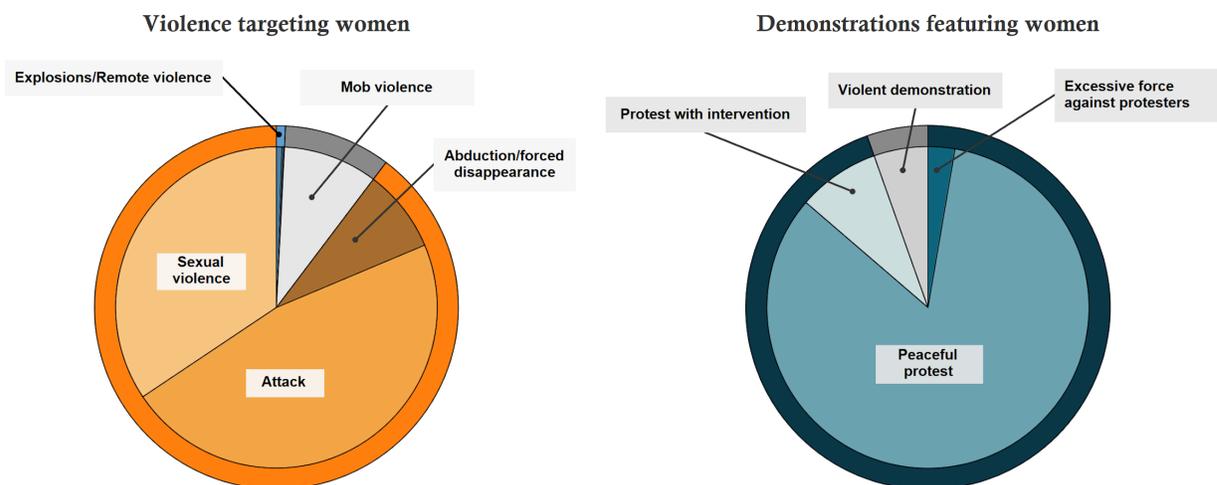
In addition to capturing violence targeting women, data capture demonstrations featuring women. Demonstrations include either Protesters or Rioters as one of the primary actors within ACLED coding methodology depending on whether demonstrators remained peaceful or engaged in violence/vandalism, respectively. Again, in line with ACLED’s coding of *associate actor* identity categories, women are coded alongside either Protesters or Rioters in these contexts. Women are coded in such events -- denoting that a demonstration *featured* women -- if the demonstrators are made up entirely or a majority of women (e.g. a gathering of mothers of prisoners), a women’s group (e.g. Women of Zimbabwe Arise [WOZA], the Free Women’s Movement [TJA] in Turkey, or the All India Democratic Women’s Association [AIDWA]), or around women’s rights specifically (e.g. women’s reproductive rights, or policies around women’s clothing).

³ If an armed actor has ties to an ethnic or religious group, this is coded as a militia. Perpetrators of violence that involve women, such as the Free Women’s Units of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK-YJA STAR), are not coded with an associate actor category denoting ‘women’ as part of this coding structure.

⁴ In addition to women being targeted on the basis of gender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and groups can also face gendered violence. As such, LGBT are also included as an identity category, when salient and reported, along the same lines outlined here.

⁵ For example, if a Saudi civilian is killed in an attack in Saudi Arabia, they are not coded with an *associate actor* categorization denoting they are Arab in ACLED data, given this was not necessarily a salient identity in the targeting; it is likely, unless specifically reported otherwise, that the perpetrator too of that attack was also Arab in the Saudi Arabian context. However, an Arab victim of an attack in Israel would indeed be coded with such an *associate actor* categorization given the salience of such an identity within that specific context.

There are over 4,000 events involving violence targeting women and over 3,600 demonstrations featuring women in ACLED data



Coding schema for events involving violence targeting women

Event type	Sub-event type	Definition of sub-event type	Example from data	% of total events involving violence targeting women
Violence against civilians	Attack	Violence of a non-sexual nature by an armed actor targeting an unarmed individual.	<i>In Palestine on 26 Sep 2017: A young Palestinian woman has reportedly sustained injuries after an Israeli settler ran her over in Al Arroub.</i>	47%
Violence against civilians	Sexual violence	Any action inflicting physical harm of a sexual nature, regardless of the age of the victim (i.e. including, but not limited to, rape)	<i>In Ukraine on 20 Apr 2019: Two Ukrainian servicemen threatened with a weapon and raped a civilian woman in Nyzhnyoteple, Luhansk.</i>	34%
Violence against civilians	Abduction/ Forced disappearance	Kidnapping (i.e. abduction, forced disappearance) without reports of other physical violence. ⁶	<i>In the Philippines on 20 Jun 2018: Abu Sayyaf rebels kidnapped the daughter and ex-wife of a former mayor at their house in Sulu province.</i>	8%
Explosions/ Remote violence ⁷	Suicide bomb	An attack in which a militant uses an explosive device, killing him/herself in the process -- coded if occurring in the absence of other forms of violence.	<i>In Pakistan on 3 Feb 2010: Four schoolgirls were killed in a suicide bomb blast carried out by an Uzbek national near a school in Koto, while 124 others were injured, including 2 US soldiers and 70 schoolgirls.</i>	0.1%
Explosions/ Remote violence	Grenade	An explosive weapon thrown by hand -- coded if occurring in the absence of other forms of violence. This does not include "crude bombs" (such as Molotov cocktails, firecrackers, cherry bombs, petrol bombs, etc.)	<i>In Syria on 24 May 2018: A woman was killed by a grenade thrown by a QSD fighter over a disagreement that took place in the woman's house.</i>	0.5%

⁶ State-sanctioned arrests are not included here unless they are reported to have been conducted extra-judicially. By contrast, non-state groups can almost never engage in arrests, and their activity engaging in "arresting" is typically coded as an abduction or forced disappearance. In rare cases where non-state groups are able to maintain some level of judicial/penal system, they would also be able to engage in 'Arrests', and these actions would be indeed coded under the 'Arrests' sub-event type and not as abductions or forced disappearances.

⁷ While ACLED captures other forms of Explosions/Remote violence -- including chemical weapons, air/drone strikes, and shelling/artillery/missile attack -- as of the writing of this report, no violence targeting women was reported to have occurred under these sub-event types, especially given the nature of these tactics.

Explosions/ Remote violence	Remote explosive/ landmine/ IED	Detonation of remotely- or victim-activated devices (e.g. landmines, IEDs, UXOs, bombs, etc.) -- coded if occurring in the absence of other forms of violence.	<i>In Somalia on 18 Mar 2019: An under-vehicle IED attached to the private vehicle of a female government staff member exploded in Hodan District.</i>	0.2%
Riots	Mob violence	A spontaneous mob, including 'vigilantes' (active outside of the context of a demonstration) engaging in violence without the use of lethal weapons.	<i>In Morocco on 16 Jun 2015: An angry crowd surrounded two women wearing "indecent" dresses in a market near Agadir; at least two men verbally and physically assaulted them before police intervened and arrested the women.</i>	9.5%

Coding schema for demonstrations featuring women

Event type	Sub-event type	Definition of sub-event type	Example from data	% of total events involving demonstrations featuring women
Riots	Violent demonstration	When a group of individuals engages in a demonstration involving violent and/or destructive behaviour (e.g. vandalism; road-blocking using barricades, burning tires, or other material).	<i>In Tunisia on 26 Nov 2018: The mostly female residents of Sidi Maamar barricaded the main road and burned tires, demanding compensation after flooding.</i>	5%
Protests	Protest with intervention	When individuals are engaged in a peaceful protest during which there is an attempt to disperse or suppress the protest without serious/lethal injuries being reported or the targeting of protesters with lethal weapons. Or any instance where armed groups or rioters interact with peaceful protesters without resulting in serious/lethal injuries.	<i>In Nepal on 18 Aug 2018: Women activists staged a demonstration in Kathmandu city. The group demanded a provision for death penalty against rapists. Police intervened and arrested some protesters.</i>	8%
Protests	Excessive force against protesters	When individuals are engaged in a peaceful protest and are targeted with violence by an actor leading to (or if it could lead to) serious/lethal injuries.	<i>In Cambodia on 27 May 2013: Riot police moved 3000 factory workers - most of them women - off a roadblock in Phnom Penh, using electric batons. At least 23 people were hurt, including a pregnant woman who miscarried due to her injuries.</i>	3%
Protests	Peaceful protest	When demonstrators are engaged in a protest that is peaceful (i.e. while not engaging in violence or other forms of rioting behaviour) and remain undispersed (i.e. are not faced with any sort of force or engagement)	<i>In Serbia on 5 April 2019: Activists of 'Women in Black' held a protest on the occasion of the anniversary of the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.</i>	84%

What the data can and cannot be used for

When using these data, it is critical to keep the bounds of this specific project in mind. First, political violence *targeting* women here is not equivalent to all political violence *against* women; only cases where women are *targeted* are included. For example, an airstrike on a town may kill both men and women; the women in this case were not specifically targeted over the men, rather civilians more generally were targeted. Such a case would not be specifically categorized as 'political violence targeting women' here. Similarly, demonstrations *featuring* women are not equivalent to demonstrations *involving*

women. Only the former are included. For example, a protest around labor rights might involve both men and women; the women in this case were not necessarily a majority, nor were they advocating for ‘women’s rights’ in particular. As a result, such a case would not be specifically categorized as a ‘demonstration featuring women’ here. **This means that these data should neither be used to understand all political violence women face nor to understand the full involvement of women in social movements; those are both much larger subsets of information.**

Second, only political/public violence is included; domestic, interpersonal, or intimate partner violence is excluded. Personal violence significantly impacts the lives of women around the world ([Stark & Ager, 2011](#)); the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\) \(2018\)](#) finds that over half the murders of women in 2017 were perpetrated by intimate partners and family members, and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\) \(2017\)](#) estimates that over one-third of women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime, most likely at the hands of an intimate partner. The total sum of all violence that women face hence stretches far beyond the subset of violence captured in the data here.

Third, only physical violence (or an attempt at physical violence, such as a failed assassination attempt) is included; threats of physical violence or intimidation are excluded. This type of harassment can indeed play a crucial role in thwarting women’s political participation through fear, but it falls outside of information covered by ACLED. The [Inter-Parliamentary Union \(IPU\) \(2016\)](#) finds that over 80% of their sample of women parliamentarians experienced psychological intimidation. This type of intimidation is increasingly occurring online, contributing to making it even more prevalent. According to an [Amnesty International report from \(2018\)](#), women experienced threats of physical or sexual violence online, especially following events raising a woman’s profile (such as a media appearance). This intimidation, however, is not limited solely to women in politics. [The International Foundation for Electoral Systems \(IFES\) \(2019\)](#) finds that “73 percent of women online have been exposed to or experienced some type of cyberviolence, ... [and that this violence] is intended to silence women’s voices and prevent them from exercising their civic and political rights.” While such intimidation can play an important role in shaping women’s political participation, only physical violence is included in these data. This project captures a different subset of events than work by those organizations who include ‘non-physical violence’ in their definition, such as the [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\) \(2018\)](#), which includes (in addition to physical and sexual violence) psychological violence, economic violence, and threats/coercion.

Fourth, violence targeting women is included regardless of the occupation of women, meaning that coverage is not limited solely to women in politics. Women in politics can indeed be the targets of such violence, with the data pointing to a strong relationship between elections and violence targeting women. The [IPU \(2016\)](#) finds that one in five women parliamentarians have experienced physical violence. However, this violence does not solely target those running for office -- as [IFES \(2011\)](#) underlined in its seminal piece nearly a decade ago looking at the effects of various forms of violence on women in politics, as well as female voters, election staff, and party members. The data here go even a step farther so as to include political violence incurred outside of election periods as well, targeting all women regardless of whether they are voters, election staff, politicians, party members, etc.

Last, it is important to note that underreporting by victims is common due to backlash or normative concerns and this should be considered when drawing conclusions from the data. As is the same for all datasets, coverage within the ACLED dataset is limited to what has been reported in some capacity. ACLED makes every attempt to accurately and thoroughly

capture political violence through various sources of reporting including traditional media,⁸ new media,⁹ reports by international organizations, and information gathered by local partners.

Coverage of the data

Much of the analysis exploring trends around politically violent targeting of women are case studies of specific countries and/or specific time periods, such as election periods or war-time contexts. More thorough and flexible coverage here allows for cross-country and -time period comparisons that are not feasible through using in-depth case studies alone. These new data are publicly accessible¹⁰ and are updated on a weekly basis in conjunction with ACLED's weekly data release schedule. All previous ACLED data have been back-coded to integrate this new associate actor; all future geographic expansions by ACLED will include this information going forward as well. ACLED works to maintain a 'living dataset', meaning that in addition to weekly releases of new data covering the week prior, supplementation of historic periods is also ongoing with information from new sources, targeted research, and new partnerships being integrated.

ACLED is an event-based dataset, meaning that each entry in the dataset is an 'event'; events are denoted by the involvement of designated actors, occurring in a specific named location and on a specific day. When recording political violence targeting women, an event can involve one to many victims: three women killed by a soldier in a specific town on a certain day is collected as a single event; a girls' school attacked in a specific town on a certain day is coded the same way. The number of *events* should therefore not be conflated with the number of *victims* – in the same way that the number of violent events in the ACLED dataset should not be conflated with the number of fatalities. These capture different trends.

An important point to remember regarding coverage is ACLED's non-uniform coverage of regions over time. ACLED began as an African data project and hence data covering the African continent span back to 1997 (covered to present). An expansion later to South and Southeast Asia means that data covering those regions for the most part¹¹ span back to 2010 (covered to present). An expansion then to the Middle East means that data covering that region for the most part¹² span back to 2016 (covered to present). Most recently, an expansion to Southeastern & Eastern Europe and the Balkans means that data covering that region span back to 2018. Future expansions may also have different temporal scopes. It is imperative to keep this in mind when reviewing trends across regions over time so as not to introduce an artificial spike into the data with the introduction of new regions into the timeline. Analysis undertaken here accounts for these differences, as noted, when comparing trends across time. (Please reference [ACLED's coverage](#) for further information.)

How does this initiative complement other projects exploring political violence against women?

These new data exploring both political violence targeting women, as well as demonstrations featuring women, help to address a number of critical gaps and limitations left by the constellation of efforts over the years to monitor and assess political gender-based violence of a physical nature.

⁸ ACLED researchers review thousands of traditional media sources in over 20 languages ranging from national newspapers to local radio.

⁹ New media refers specifically to sources such as trusted Twitter accounts (such as those of journalists) and vetted Telegram channels.

¹⁰ For more on accessibility and stipulations around such, please see the [Terms of Use and Attribution Policy](#).

¹¹ In South Asia, coverage of India span back to 2016 (covered to present), and Afghanistan spans back to 2017 (covered to present). In Southeast Asia, coverage of Indonesia spans back to 2015 (covered to present); the Philippines spans back to 2016 (covered to present); and Malaysia spans back to 2018 (covered to present).

¹² Coverage of Syria spans back to 2017 (covered to present); coverage of Yemen will soon expand back to 2015 (covered to present).

A number of projects and initiatives have looked specifically at violence against politicians in particular, or including political party members and voters as well. Some have also included state and election officials or activists. This project goes beyond these previous efforts to document political violence targeting women by capturing the repression of everyday women trying to engage in political processes, as well as demonstrators advocating for certain governance practices.

There has also been a gap around the temporal coverage of violence targeting women: projects and initiatives have focused their attention largely on election periods (such as [NDI's Votes Without Violence](#) campaign, or [IFES' work](#) given their specific mandate) or war-time contexts (such as the [SVAC dataset](#)). This project goes beyond such bounds and covers such violence across time, regardless of context -- and within the temporal bounds of the ACLED dataset.

The type of political violence against women has also been limited largely to sexual violence within cross-country large-N data projects, like the [SVAC dataset](#). This project extends coverage to look beyond solely sexual violence, assessing the impact of non-sexual attacks, as well as abductions/forced disappearances, mob violence, various forms of explosions/remote violence, and demonstrations.

The perpetrators of violence targeting women has often been bound to an understanding of 'formal actors', such as named groups -- excluding cases in which unidentified or anonymous actors, or spontaneous mobs, engaged in such violence. This project accounts for these actors.

Conducting comparisons across countries and regions had also been difficult previously. While a large number of enlightening case studies have been conducted over time by a number of organizations, given varied methodologies and coverage, it was difficult to compare apples to oranges. This project applies a standardized methodology over time and space, covering countries consistently.

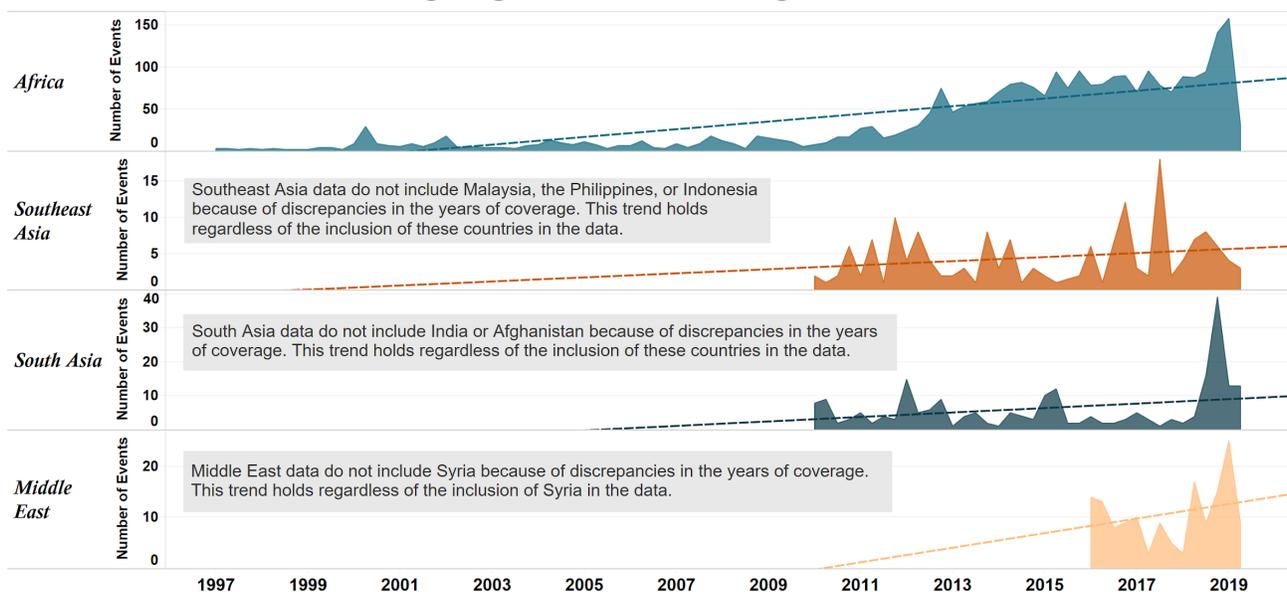
Though this project too has limitations, defined by its bounds. It does not speak to physical violence in the private sphere -- such as domestic violence, interpersonal violence, or intimate partner violence. It does not account for criminal violence (though admittedly the line between criminal and political can be quite blurred in certain contexts). It speaks only to physical violence -- it does not include reference to psycho-social violence or online violence, including harassment and intimidations, for example. It does not specifically distinguish election periods (or whether the victim was specifically a politician or not), or war-time contexts (or the number of rapes in such a context). Other projects will be better placed to answer such questions. And country-case studies will continue to be an important tool in understanding specific contexts more closely. **In all, this initiative seeks to be a complement to the various initiatives which have come before to help capture the many multi-faceted threats that women face.**

II. EXPLORING TRENDS IN POLITICAL VIOLENCE TARGETING WOMEN

Political violence targeting women is increasing

Political violence targeting women is increasing across various regions of the world (see figure below).¹³ Proportionally more events involving violence targeting women occur in Africa than in any other region reviewed here (comparatively since 2018). However, in nearly every region reviewed in the figure below (in line with [ACLED data coverage](#)), the first quarter of 2019 featured record or near-record high levels of violence targeting women: twice as many events are reported during the first quarter of 2019 than during the first quarter of 2018. This points to a rising threat to women around the world.¹⁴

Violence targeting women is increasing around the world



The relationship between political violence targeting women and war-time is complex

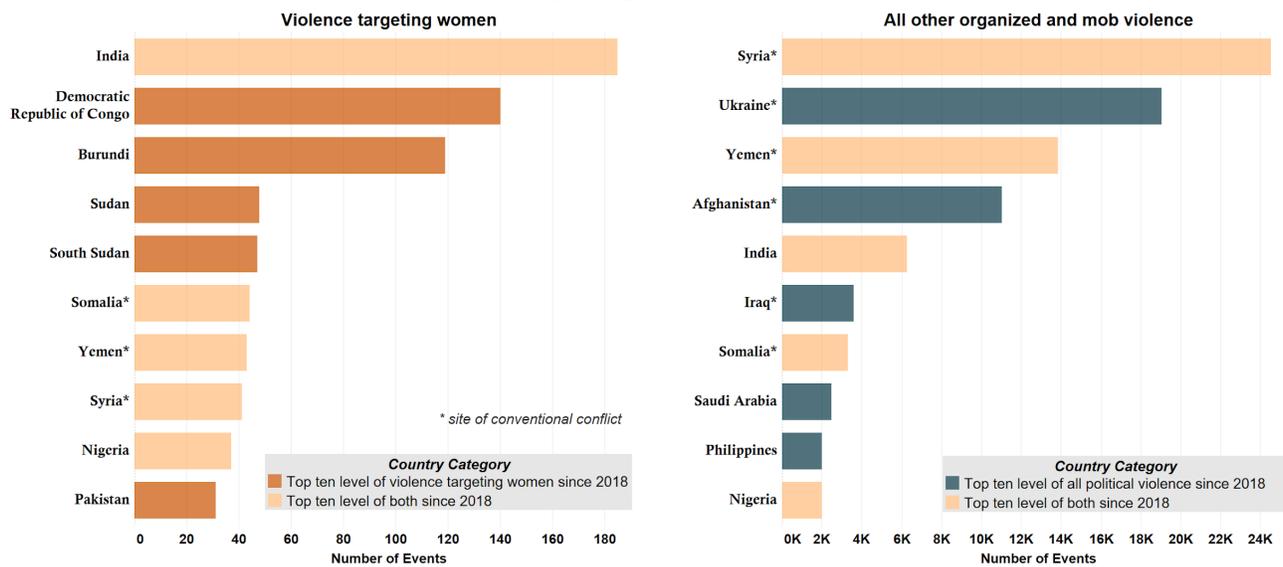
Women are targeted in both places where organized violence is already high, such as large-scale conventional wars (countries denoted with an asterisk), like Somalia and Syria, as well as in contexts where levels of violence are not considered at crisis levels, such as Burundi and Pakistan (see figure below). Conventional warfare does not necessarily imply higher levels of violence targeting women; in Afghanistan or Ukraine, civilian targeting amid a conventional war has not been accompanied by high levels of violence targeting women.¹⁵ Violence targeting women may also be a tactic that can vary over time within the context of a war.

¹³ Given the longer timeline of coverage by ACLED for the regions depicted in the graph, these are the regions explored -- to allow for analysis of trends over time. Data covering Southeastern & Eastern Europe and the Balkans were only recently published, hence only spanning back to 2018; given the shorter time period of coverage, the region is not included in the longer temporal trend figure here. Data covering Latin America, which scholars find is home to potentially high levels of violence against women in politics ([Krook & Restrepo Sanin, 2016](#)), are not yet available; data covering Latin America - as well as Central Asia & the Caucasus, Western Europe, and East Asia -- will be published in the coming months.

¹⁴ When working with ACLED data across regions, it is important to remember the temporal variation in ACLED coverage by region, as outlined in the previous section; this is why trends are explored here since 2018, to ensure standard coverage across countries.

¹⁵ See discussion above about the distinction between the *targeting* of women, and how this is a subset of all violence that women face more largely.

Countries with the highest number of political violence events overall, and events involving violence targeting women since 2018



The relationship between the use of political violence to target women and conventional warfare or large-scale organized violence is therefore a complex one. This is in line with [Wood's \(2006\)](#) findings that in armed conflict, the use of sexual violence specifically is not uniform; patterns of sexual violence are linked to actors and their specific incentives and organizational characteristics. In short, the use of such violence varies by the type of perpetrator. Trends here suggest that this finding may hold for beyond solely sexual violence, spanning to all political violence targeting women.

Political violence targeting women extends beyond sexual violence

Much of the current literature exploring gender-based violence focuses largely on the role of sexual violence, especially in war-time. The increased scrutiny on sexual violence is justified, especially as this form of violence disproportionately impacts women ([NDI, 2018](#)); over 95% of sexual violence events in which the gender of the victim is reported target women or girls specifically ([ACLEDD, 2019](#)). Sexual violence is often accompanied with lethal tactics, especially when occurring during war-time;¹⁶ where community attacks have also involved sexual violence, there are, on average, two reported fatalities stemming from each event. This lethality measurement largely comes from several high-fatality events (e.g. the murder and rape of entire villages). Attacks not involving sexual violence result in an average lethality of 1 reported fatality per event.

Focusing specifically on sexual violence within armed conflict too may be justified, as about 84% of sexual violence events recorded by ACLED can be categorized as occurring within armed conflict periods.¹⁷ The majority of campaigns of sexual violence also tend to occur during these contexts.

¹⁶ Technically, suicide bombings targeting women result in the most report fatalities, with, on average, over 4 reported deaths per event. However, this trend is largely driven by the very small number of such events -- four total, across all regions.

¹⁷ Whether sexual violence occurred during 'armed conflict' was determined through an analysis both of specific sexual violence events, and the context surrounding them -- i.e. whether at least two armed actors are engaged in active fighting in a non-geographically contained area.

Women face a variety of forms of political violence, including attacks, abductions/forced disappearances, mob violence, and are victims of explosions and remote violence. Sexual violence, as well as abductions/forced disappearances and mob violence, are proportionally more common in violence that targets women. Sexual violence makes up 34% of all violence targeting women though less than 2% of all recorded violence in ACLED; abductions/forced disappearances make up 8% of all violence targeting women though 5% of all violence more largely; and mob violence makes up 9% of all violence targeting women though 7% of all violence more largely.

Overall, non-sexual attacks are the most prevalent way in which women are targeted. These events comprise 47% of all events targeting women (see figure below). This suggests that while sexual violence against women is common, physical (non-sexual) violence against women is even more prevalent ([United Nations \(2015\)](#)).

Forms of anti-civilian violence vary between events involving violence targeting women and other political violence

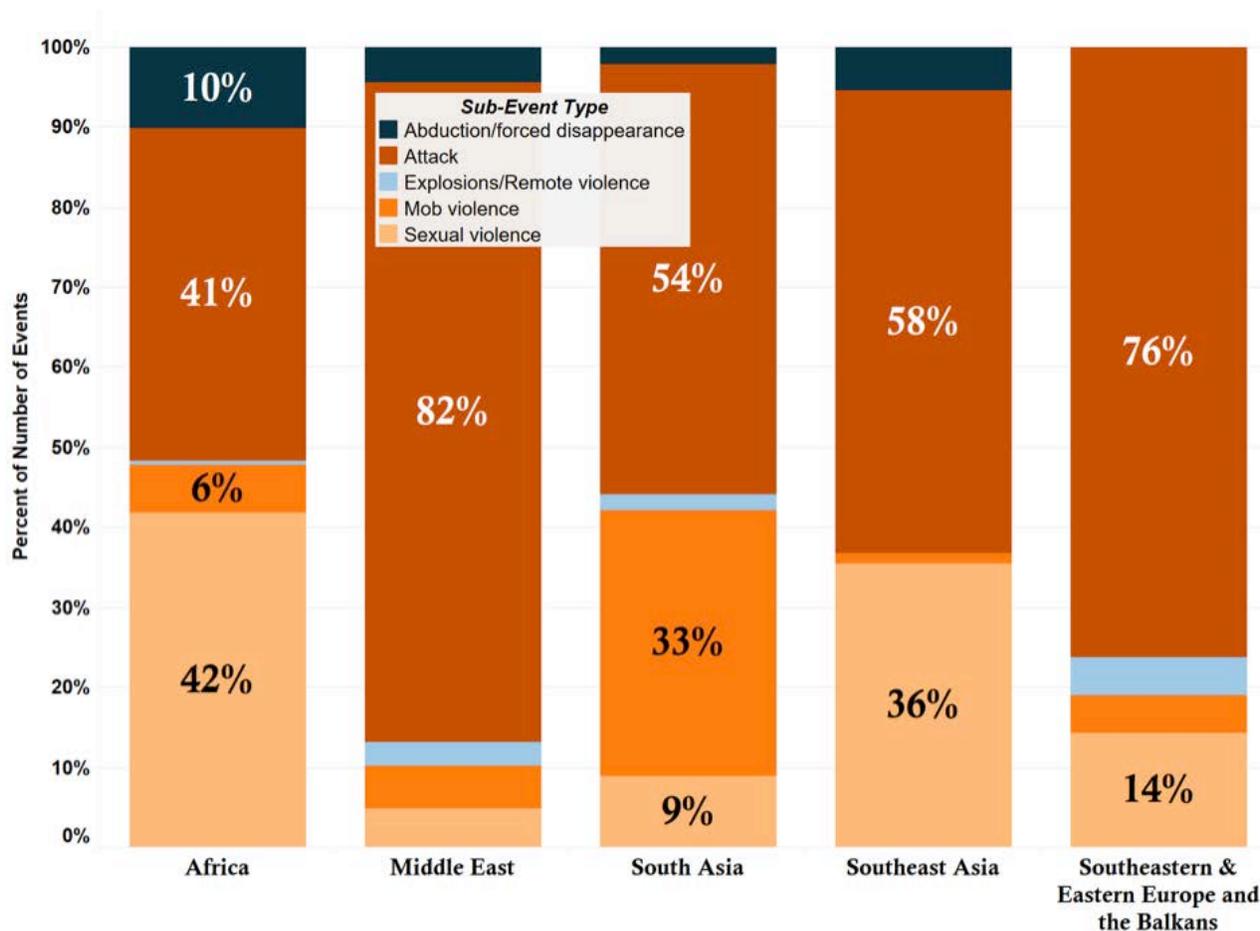


Regional variations exist in the tactics used in violence targeting women

A variety of tactics are used in violence against women; the prevalence of certain tactics varies by region. This reflects the different political and governance contexts that exist across regions as well as the manifestations of violence that shape local landscapes.

The figure below depicts the unique landscape within each region of ACLED coverage, and helps to highlight the distinctions.

Events involving violence targeting women vary across region



Attacks of a non-sexual nature (in red above), for example, are the predominant way in which women are targeted in the Middle East, where 82% of all violence targeting women in the region can be categorized in this way. Many of these events are the result of ongoing wars across the Middle East: for instance, in April 2018, the Syrian military executed 2 female civilians (a woman and her daughter) in Rural Damascus for attempting to prevent regime forces from taking over their property.

Sexual violence (in tan above), on the other hand, features prominently in both the landscapes of Africa (where it makes up 42% of all violence targeting women) as well as in Southeast Asia (where it makes up 36% of all violence targeting women). In Africa, sexual violence more often occurs in the context of armed conflict, with high levels of militant and government-perpetrated sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in South Sudan. In Southeast Asia, sexual violence is commonly used as a method of repression, particularly by state forces in Myanmar against ethnic and religious minorities.

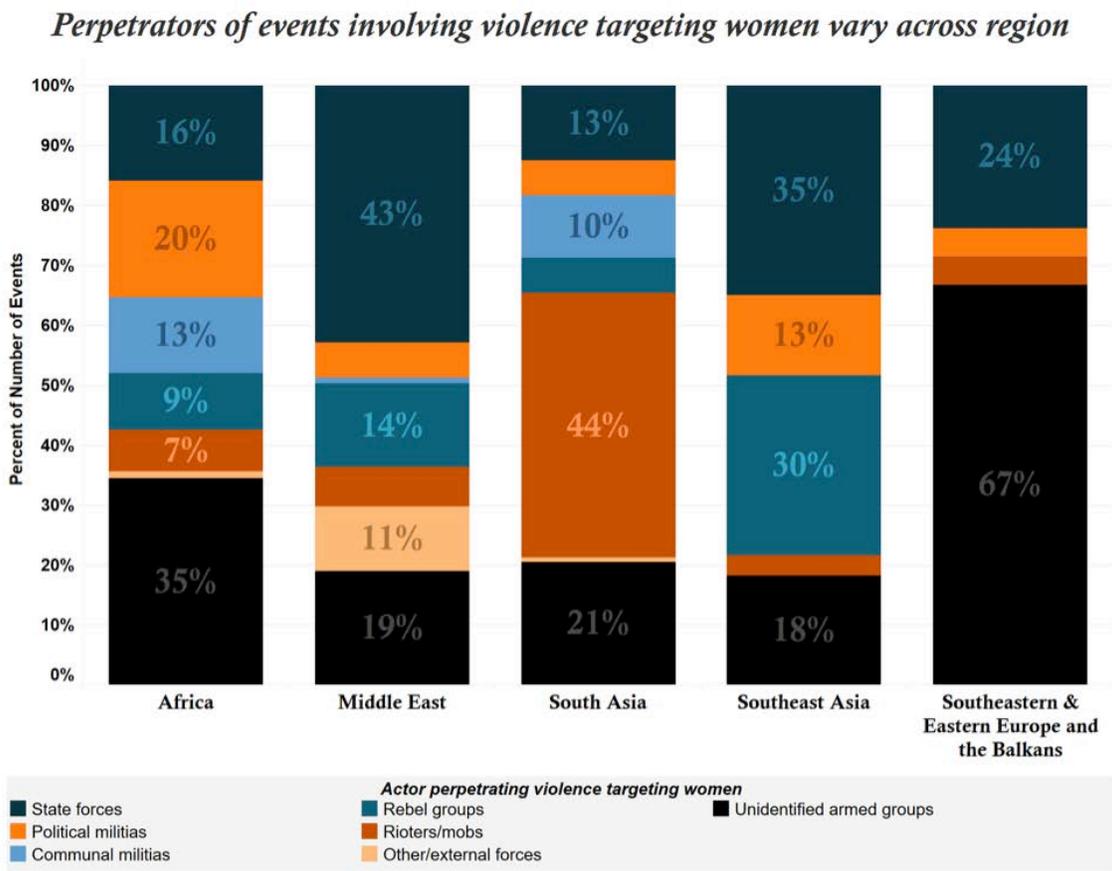
Mob violence (in orange) makes up a third of all violence targeting women in South Asia -- reflecting the prominence of mob violence as a feature of the conflict landscape in the region, particularly in India.

Abductions and forced disappearances (in navy) are comparatively more common in Africa relative to other regions, where they make up 10% of all political violence targeting women. Across Africa -- from Somalia to Nigeria -- armed groups use abductions as a tactic in insurgent campaigns; the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping by Boko Haram in 2014 is a highly publicized example, spurring the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign.

The use of explosions and remote violence (in blue) targeting women is rare, with only 1% of events involving violence targeting women across all regions being attributed to such tactics.

Perpetrators of violence targeting women vary by region

The perpetrators of violence against women vary across regions, (see figure below).



State forces (in navy above) are the predominant perpetrator of violence targeting women in the Middle East (responsible for 43% of all violence targeting women in the region). The ongoing wars in both Syria and Yemen, and the role of state forces in those wars, contributes to this trend. External forces (in tan above) is a category which includes both state forces active outside of their home country, as well as external forces like multilateral coalitions. These agents perpetrate disproportionate levels of violence targeting women in the Middle East as well, where they are responsible for 11% of violence targeting women. This trend is primarily explained by high levels of violence targeting women by Turkish forces in Syria (especially along the border) and Israeli forces in Palestine.

Militias, both political militias (in orange above) and communal militias (in blue above), perpetrate the largest proportion of violence in Africa -- 20% and 13% respectively of all violence targeting women on the continent. The Imbonerakure faction of the National Council for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) in Burundi are responsible for a large proportion of these events, making Burundi home to the highest rate of per-capita violence targeting women by far, with nearly two events involving violence targeting women per every 100,000 women.

Meanwhile, mobs (in brown above), including those affiliated to political parties or religious groups, are the primary perpetrators of violence targeting women in South Asia. These groups are responsible for nearly half (44%) of all violence targeting women in the region. These events are common in India where ‘vigilante groups’ target women for a number of reasons -- ranging from alleged illicit affairs to accusations of child lifting to allegations of witchcraft.

Rebels (in teal above) perpetrate the largest proportion of violence in Southeast Asia where they are responsible for nearly one-third (30%) of all violence targeting women in the region. Women in Southern Thailand are especially at risk at the hands of Malay Muslim separatists where they are often caught in the crosshairs of an ongoing conflict for secession. State forces, and specifically the military forces of Myanmar, are responsible for nearly one-third (35%) of such violence in the region, mostly in the form of sexual violence.

Unidentified or anonymous armed groups have carried out the largest proportion (about one-third) of all violence targeting women from the start of 2018 to the present across all regions of ACLED coverage. These groups are the primary perpetrators of this violence in Africa as well as in Southeastern & Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where they are responsible for 35% and 67% of all violence targeting women in each region, respectively. Overlooking violence targeting women perpetrated by unidentified actors would thus result in significant gaps in our understanding of where and how women are targeted.

These trends also largely hold in the use of sexual violence as well; political militias and anonymous armed groups are the primary perpetrators of sexual violence across Africa (as well as South Asia). State forces are the primary culprit in Southeast Asia (especially in Myanmar), the Middle East, Southeastern & Eastern Europe and the Balkans. These findings are partially in line with the findings by Cohen and Nordas ([2014](#); [2015](#)) in their construction and analysis of the Sexual Violence in Armed conflict dataset (SVAC). ACLED data point to the prominence of political militias, including pro-government militias, and anonymous/unidentified armed groups in perpetrating sexual violence. Almost half of all sexual violence events recorded by ACLED are perpetrated by these actors.

The variation in findings here between the results discussed here (which find political militias and unidentified armed groups to be the primary perpetrators of sexual violence) and findings by Cohen and Nordas (which find state forces to be the primary perpetrators of sexual violence) may be a result of a number of factors. First, ACLED data record sexual violence events both during *and outside of* armed conflict periods, resulting in a wider subset of contexts included. Second, in this report, sexual violence against women and girls specifically is being explored, given the theme of political violence targeting women, resulting in a different subset of events (n.b. ACLED records sexual violence events regardless of the gender or age of the victim, meaning that data are available around sexual violence with victims who are men, boys, transgender, or unknown, even if they are not explored in this report here). Third, ACLED counts the number of events

defined as a specific engagement between actors on a specific day in a specific location; this is quite distinct from an assessment at the level of conflict-actor-year accounting for prevalence, and results in a more granular subset of information. Finally, ACLED includes violence by a wider swath of actors than other datasets. Violence perpetrated by unidentified/anonymous agents is included; as is violence perpetrated by mobs and ‘vigilantes’ which are neither formally organized nor armed, and who engage in spontaneous violence. These actors are the perpetrators of quite a large proportion of sexual violence recorded by ACLED, meaning that their exclusion results in a significant shift in what the landscape looks like. All this said, SVAC is one of the first quantitative datasets capturing violence largely targeting women and made a considerable contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of sexual violence during armed conflict.

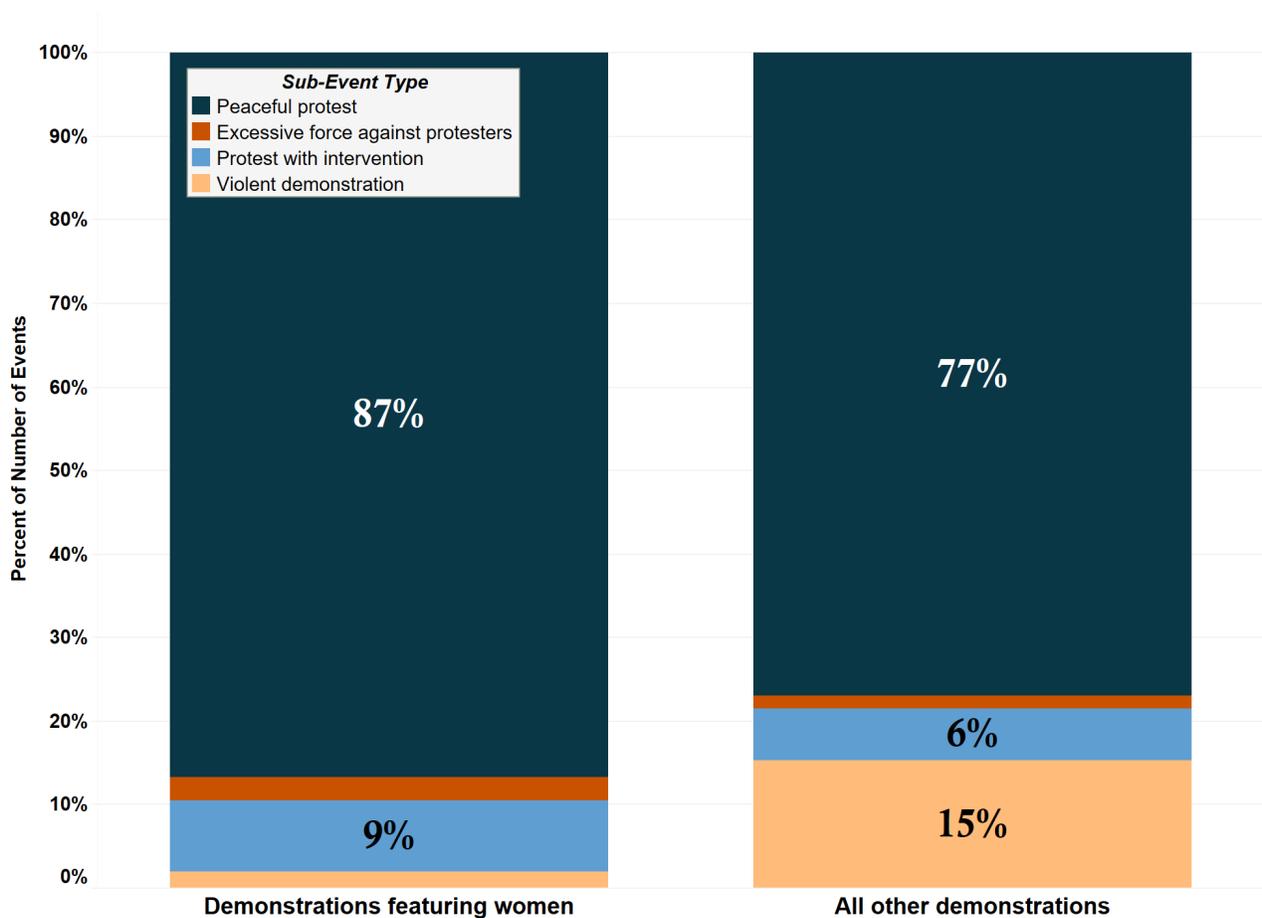
III. EXPLORING TRENDS IN DEMONSTRATIONS FEATURING WOMEN

Demonstrations featuring women are increasing

Demonstrations featuring women are on the rise; in nearly every region reviewed (per ACLED coverage), the first quarter of 2019 featured record or near-record high levels of demonstration events featuring women.

The vast majority (87%) of demonstration events featuring women are peaceful protests (see figure below, in navy). This is a significant increase over the proportion of demonstration events *not predominantly featuring women*, of which 77% are peaceful protests.¹⁸ A smaller proportion of demonstrations featuring women turn to violence or vandalism relative to demonstrations in which women are not featured (in tan).

Demonstration types vary according to whether women are featured



Though the lion’s share of demonstration activity featuring women are peaceful protests, not all demonstrations in which women are featured are peaceful. A higher proportion of protests featuring women are met with intervention, relative to protests in which women are not featured (in blue above). Intervention can include any sort of engagement by other actors, ranging from arrests to non-lethal or less severe violent engagement, such as being met with tear gas or water cannons with

¹⁸ ‘Peaceful protests’ are events in which demonstrators do not engage in violence or vandalism, and are also not met with any kind of intervention or excessive force by state forces, violent counter-demonstrators, or otherwise.

no serious injuries/deaths reported. In cases where protests are met with lethal force (regardless of whether casualties were reported) or severe violence resulting in mass casualties and/or hospitalizations, they are categorized as entailing ‘excessive force against protesters’. A higher proportion of protests featuring women are met with such excessive force (in brown), relative to protests in which women are not featured.

In total, 11% of demonstrations featuring women are met with some sort of intervention or excessive force, relative to only 8% of demonstrations in which women are not featured. Those engaging in intervention or excessive force against protesters tend to be state forces, such as police. These trends hold especially true in Southeast Asia and across Africa and point to the increased threat women face when engaging in public demonstrations, stating support for or disapproval of policies and governance.

IV. CONCLUSION

The new data outlined in this report explore both political violence targeting women as well as demonstrations featuring women across numerous regions of the world. This initiative complements projects that have come before it that explore political violence targeting women.

The data go beyond previous efforts by capturing the repression of everyday women trying to engage in political processes, as well as demonstrators advocating for certain governance practices. With these data, we can now see that physical, political violence targeting women of all walks of life is on the rise around the world -- as are demonstrations featuring women, which are met with a higher rate of intervention and force.

The report also explores political violence targeting women across time periods beyond solely war-time or election periods. With these data, we can now see that while these periods of contention are associated with a heightened risk for women, violence targeting women is not limited to these periods and stretches across contexts.

While sexual violence is of course included within the scope of violence used to target women, this initiative looks beyond solely sexual violence. It also assesses the impact of non-sexual attacks, as well as abductions/forced disappearances, mob violence, various forms of explosions/remote violence, and demonstrations. With these data, it is evident that while sexual violence is pervasive, non-sexual attacks are the most commonly experienced form of violence that women face.

Violence targeting women is perpetrated by a variety of agents, including unidentified or anonymous actors, as well as spontaneous mobs. This project accounts for these actors. About one-third of the violence targeting women since the start of 2018 has been perpetrated by these anonymous armed groups; and mobs play a critical role in carrying out such violence, especially in South Asia where they are responsible for nearly half of all violence targeting women.

Lastly, the standardized methodology over time and space that this initiative uses allows users to conduct comparisons of trends across countries and regions as well as time periods. As a result, with these data, we can now see that the threats to women vary across regions, both in the form that they take as well as in who the primary perpetrators of this violence are.

This latter point helps to highlight how meaningful solutions to address the issue of physical, political violence targeting women globally will need to be varied in order to speak to the various manifestations of such violence around the world -- one size does not fit all. With the availability of these new data, users will be able to not only monitor such trends, but also to integrate such data into programming and policymaking.

These data are publicly accessible via ACLED's website -- both through [the data export tool](#) as well as via a [curated data file](#) -- and also via the [API](#) on a weekly basis, allowing users to monitor these trends in near-real-time for analysis, programming, early warning, advocacy, and more. While these data may be a positive step in offering users access to quantitative data not previously available, limitations will continue to exist, especially as a result of reporting. To combat this, ACLED will continue to supplement the historical data alongside the weekly data releases. Identifying new sources of information through harnessing 'new media' and identifying subnational media in local languages are both steps in that direction -- as is the establishment of partnerships with local organizations collecting such information. ACLED

collaborates with a number of such organizations already, and will continue to identify new relationships of this nature going forward in an effort to improve the data to better reflect local realities. **If you are an organization collecting information on political violence targeting women, or demonstrations featuring women, and are interested in a partnership with ACLED to help extend coverage of these threats to women further, please reach out to us at admin@acleddata.com.**