RESEÑAS/NOTAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Symbolic Violence as a Form of Violence against Women in Politics: A Critical Examination

La violencia simbólica como forma de violencia contra las mujeres en la política: Un análisis crítico

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Violence against women in politics (VAWP) is an issue that has rapidly gained notoriety in academic works as well as in the policy world, to the extent that Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE), the Federal Electoral Tribunal (TEPJF) and the Prosecutor Specialized in Electoral Crimes presented the *"Protocolo para la Atención de la Violencia Política contra las Mujeres en Razón de Género"* (hereafter, 'the Protocol', 2017) ahead of the most recent elections. The protocol aims to detect, prevent and mitigate gender-based political violence, which is a recurrent problem across Mexico and worldwide, including within political parties and even in the Chamber of Senators and Deputies. However, the scientific exploration on VAWP is still imperfect and emerging. This research note expresses reflections on one of the most challenging inquiry areas in this field, which has significant implications both for future academic directions in this field and for the practical applications of Mexico's Protocol and other similar laws under consideration across Latin America. This is the issue of what is —and what is not— an actual form of VAWP.

Violence against women in politics is a pervasive and debilitating problem for democracies worldwide, as demonstrated in the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences (SRVAW) report A/73/301 (UNGA, 2018) in October 2018. The category of symbolic violence was adapted from sociology and appended to earlier typologies of gendered political violence[1] by Krook (2017) and Krook and Restrepo

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[1] The first four elements of Krook's classification reprised an existing typology published and presented previously by Bardall in 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2016, and subsequently adapted with various modifications by several international organizations including the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and UN Women.

(2016a, b).[2] Although not included in the SRVAW definition of VAWP, the category of symbolic violence was rapidly integrated into other influential policy documents, most notably into the *Ley Modelo Interamericana sobre Violencia Política contra las Mujeres* (article 3) of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI) of the Organization of American States, and into Mexico's Protocol. The introduction of symbolic violence to the growing conversation on VAWP is important but fraught.

This research note deepens the examination of symbolic forms of VAWP by situating the concept in relation to its theoretical origins, deconstructing it to provide further specificity and considering its value added in terms of conceptual contributions as well as legal and social attributes. This paper argues that, although symbolic violence impacting women is a serious issue, it should not be regarded as part of a typology of VAWP because of its dissimilarities to other recognized types of VAWP, including in its forms, outcomes, motives and governing normative frameworks as well as the inability to document it with quantitative data. Furthermore, incorporating symbolic violence as a category among others poses distinct practical and ethical challenges for law enforcement. Instead, symbolic violence should be studied among other theories of social control and domination.

To understand the place of symbolic violence among other forms of VAWP, we need to recall a few key points about the theoretical progenitors of VAWP: political violence (PV) and gender-based violence (GBV). Mainstream research defines political violence as random or organized acts that seek to determine, delay or influence political processes through the use of destructive and broadly illegal behaviors resulting in material harm. Perpetrators intentionally seek to coercively define political outcomes, using methods that violate international norms and/or national laws. Recognizing that political violence acts differently on different sexes, a gendered view of political violence incorporates forms of violence that affect women as well as men, specifically physical (including sexual), economic and socio-psychological violence (Bardall, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016; Krook, 2017; Krook & Restrepo, 2016a, 2016b; UNGA, 2018). As with the classic definition, these acts of violence are interpersonal, recognizable by their motive, timing and targets and exercised consciously by their perpetrators upon victims who resist being harmed.

Symbolic violence is recognized by a growing number of authors as acting upon women's political participation (Albaine, 2014; Archenti & Albaine, 2013; Cerva, 2014; Krook, 2017;

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[2] Since this article was accepted for publication and after review of an earlier version of this piece, author M.L. Krook revised this typology, replacing "symbolic" violence with "symbiotic" violence (Krook 2019, cited in Krook and Restrepo-Sanin, July 2019). According to the revised typology, semiotic violence is perpetrated through degrading images and sexist language, using strategies of objectification, symbolic annihilation and negative gendered language. However, the original concept of symbolic violence remains in the Mexican Protocol and MESECVI's model law and is cited in dozens of scholarly works. It is incumbent to engage in critical conversation about this concept. Further, it is necessary to understand the distinction between the earlier concept of symbolic violence and symbiotic violence.

Krook & Restrepo, 2016a, 2016b; Machicao, 2004, 2011) and was formally added to the academic classification of VAWP by Krook (2017). Comprised of acts which "delegitimize female politicians through gendered tropes denying them competence in the political sphere" Krook and Restrepo (2016a) assert that symbolic violence "operates at the level of portrayal and representation, seeking to erase or nullify women's presence in political office" (p. 144).

The acts of symbolic VAWP described in these works can be deconstructed into two subcategories: acts of commission and acts of omission. According to the examples Krook (2017) and Krook and Restrepo (2016a, 2016b) provide, symbolic VAWP includes acts of commission, ranging from inciting bodily harm (such as incitation of physical aggression via social media), "negative treatment that 'crosses the line' and becomes violence when it entails fundamental disrespect for human dignity…", sexist comments and harassment, sexual objectification, and proactive efforts to silence women in public life through legal or publicity devices. Under this formulation, symbolic VAWP also includes acts of omission, such as rendering women invisible, "not recognizing, or explicitly denying the existence of, a female politician for the simple fact of being a woman" and when women experience difficulty in asserting their authority, when their qualifications are questioned on the basis of their sex and where their ideas are appropriated by men (Krook, 2017; Krook & Restrepo, 2016a, 2016b).

The introduction of symbolic violence to the typology of gendered forms of political violence is significant for scholars of democratization. It marks a conceptual break from the origins in comparative democratization and translates the conversation into the languages of feminist political theory and sociology. The use of the term in the context of recent VAWP writing differs significantly from mainstream research, drawing instead on Bourdieu's sociological theory, where the dominated class (e.g. women) is the target of influence, not a proxy.

The phrase 'symbolic violence' was introduced into the VAWP conversation with perfunctory acknowledgement of its parent theory; however, deep understanding the root concept is vital to situating it meaningfully as a potential form of VAWP affecting democratization processes in the world. This author makes no claim of being a sociologist, but a few basic lessons on Bourdieu's theory are called for at this juncture if we want to make a meaningful examination of if and how this concept has its place at the table of other forms of violence in the political space. Hold on to your hats, this is something of a mind-bender for political science readers:

To Bourdieu (1979, 1991, 2001), symbolic violence is the purposeful imposition of the ideas and values of a ruling cultural class (for example, men with certain social characteristics) onto a dominated social group, such as women, often through subconscious means (Udasmoro, 2013). Symbolic violence is the voluntary submission to legally-sanctioned relations of domination resulting in and sustaining a social power imbalance. Key to Bourdieu's symbolic violence is the perception of its legitimacy by all parties directly concerned (Bourdieu & Passeron,

1990; Jenkins, 1992). This legitimacy relies on three core factors: consent, complicity and misrecognition (Morgan & Björkert, 2006). Coercion occurs when the dominated consent to their domination because they understand the situation to be normal, legal and legitimate (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 170). Bourdieu (1991) states: "Symbolic violence can only be exercised… in a form which results in its misrecognition… which results in its recognition as legitimate" (p. 140). This unconscious complicity between dominated and dominator is the defining characteristic of symbolic violence. Although Bourdieu believed the classic example of the existence of symbolic violence existed in the repression of women in modern western society, symbolic violence is not considered to be a gender-specific phenomenon (Krais, 1993).

Bourdieu's theory has sparked decades of intense debate. While political scientists have overlooked it, sociologists have misinterpreted and misappropriated it (Topper, 2001). Others question the very existence of symbolic violence, characterizing it as "contentious, intellectually suspect and conceptually hazardous —not a category of violence the rigorous analyst of social life is eager to add to the already troubled field of violence studies" (Colaguori, 2010, p. 396). To Collins (2008), "'symbolic violence' is mere theoretical wordplay; to take it literally would be to grossly misunderstand the nature of real violence" (p. 25).

In adapting symbolic violence as an additional type of VAWP, we too should ask Colaguori's (2010) questions: "Is symbolic violence a valid and useful concept that captures some social scientific fact that adds understanding to the sovereign role of violence in the geopolitics of the present age? Or is symbolic violence an imprecise way to speak about power relations and forms of domination that are better accommodated within the existing lexicon of critical sociology?" (p. 391) —or that of political science?

Sociological symbolic violence deviates from other forms of VAWP in several significant ways. Under the four other forms of VAWP (physical, psychological, sexual, economic), there is no question in recognizing when an act of violence has occurred, by whom and against whom (as much as perpetrators may try to flee or disguise their acts). In contrast, Bourdieu's violence breaks with existing parameters of violence because symbolic violence is based on the consent of its victims and the shared, unconscious complicity of all parties. To Bourdieu, symbolic violence can usually exist where both parties are unconscious that it is occurring and misrecognize it as a legitimate social order. In contrast, other forms of VAWP are fundamentally conscious behaviors defined by intentional injury. Although the victims of VAWP may submit to violence for various reasons, they do not consent to it. VAWP is necessarily illegitimate and illegal under national law and/or international human rights frameworks.

This distinction is reflective of the broader purposes and nature of these violences. Whereas VAWP violates norms and laws of social relationships, symbolic violence imposes and legitimizes norms, laws and systems. This kind of violence is a generative one and serves as "a mechanism to constitute, uphold and organize existing social relations" (Colaguori,

2010, p. 392). In contrast, political violence is a phenomenon that is "purely destructive and dysfunctional, deviant and aberrant, but does not necessarily transform the very nature of social life" (Colaguori, 2010, p. 392).

These differences are reflected in corresponding methodological and empirical incompatibilities. Symbolic violence is diffuse and cannot be measured discretely, by prevalence or by incidence (Ballington, 2016). Colaguori (2010) notes, "because symbolic violence is a speculation on the sociology of consciousness it often escapes the quantifiable realm of the empirical" (p. 396). Thus, symbolic forms of VAWP cannot be recorded with the same tools as the other forms of VAWP or measured by the same standards. These distinctions are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Summary: Political, Gender-Based and Symbolic Violence Compared

	Normative Framework	Motives	Type	Forms	Outcome	Purpose
Political Violence	UDHR ICCPR	Defined by perpetrator or identifiable by the object or timing of attack	Inter-personal	Varies - The most restrictive definitions limit to fatalities; the most expanded definitions include bodily harm, sexual, economic, socio-psychological	Violate norms and laws	Functional (destructive and deviant means to disrupt or coerce political order)
Gender-Based Violence	CEDAW GR 19 DEVAW (art 1 & 2)	Identified by victim or determined by the form	Inter-personal	physical, sexual, socio-psychological, economic	Violate norms and laws	Functional (destructive and deviant means to enforce patriarchal social control)

(continuación)

	Normative Framework	Motives	Type	Forms	Outcome	Purpose
Symbolic Violence	n/a	None - Perpetrator is unconscious of perpetrating act, victim is complicit and consenting to victimization	Collective	Unconscious acts of commission and omission that sustain and nurture structural inequalities in daily life and attitudes	Establish norms and social order (including laws)	Generative (mechanism to establish and uphold social order, including laws)

Beyond this academic incongruity, legal and ethical applications of the concept reflect similar challenges. Where measurement of vawp can be defined against a (rapidly growing) framework of national, regional and international laws and normative conventions, there is and can be no arbiter for symbolic violence. Because, by definition, symbolic violence is legitimate and legal and not recognized as a violation either by its victims or perpetrators or by an international normative framework, there is no culturally or legally consistent basis for defining a scientific standard of measurement. Policy frameworks like the mescvi model law and the Mexican Protocol that try to codify and penalize symbolic violence are, at best, tangled in an oxymoronic misuse of Bourdieu's phrase, and at worst, faithful interpretations of Bourdieu open a Pandora's box of legal ethics.[3]

While (mis)applications of the concept in the policy world may cause confusion, the disparities described do not imply a difference in conceptual merit between competing definitions, but only their scientific dissimilarity: to measure symbolic violence is to assess how power imbalances are constructed; to measure political, gender-based violence or vawp is to gauge how power structures and human rights are violated.

From this brief assessment, how may we respond to Colaguori's query? Sociologists will ultimately decide, but political scientists should recognize that adaptations and extensions of the concept of symbolic violence must fully anchor it to its theoretical origins (or define where it deviates), defend it against competing theories of social control and purposefully situate it among other forms of violence. With these caveats in mind, further research on symbolic violence's relationship to vawp promises to yield rich insight.

For one, we may recognize the benefits and limitations of symbolic vawp in the policy sphere. Piscopo (2016) rightly argues that expansions of the concept of violence against

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[3] To extract themselves from this semantic *cul-de-sac*, policymakers are advised to either invest in deeper, explicit definitions or to drop the phrase 'symbolic violence' altogether and focus instead on legislating enforceable violations.

women in politics are useful from an advocacy perspective. However, sociological symbolic violence does not have an application for victim protection (because, where victims exist, they are unaware, complicit and consenting) or for legal purposes (no law can exist against legal behavior not identified as harm). As a policy goal in the field of international elections and democracy assistance, eliminating symbolic violence conflicts with principles of sovereignty because the "violence" is legal and legitimate to all parties directly concerned. Only when violence is recognized as a violation is there a basis for intervention.

From an academic perspective, two prerequisite examinations must occur before there can be consensus on adapting symbolic violence into the typology of VAWP. First, the case must be made for why symbolic violence is the most compelling sociological control mechanism where women's political participation is concerned, among a "constellation of concepts aimed at the critique of domination" (Colaguori, 2010, p. 394). Specifically, symbolic violence should be examined as one of several competing theories of social control, from Marx (economic domination) to Durkheim (social regulation through group cohesion) to Bourdieu's theoretical antecedent, Weber (legitimate bureaucratic regulation of society) (Ellickson, 1987, see also Schroyer, 1973). The rapid adoption of the phrase "symbolic violence" by VAWP scholars and advocates has seized upon a micro-interpretation of the literal term without examining it as the social theory Bourdieu intended. Comparatively revisiting symbolic violence as a theory of social control will reveal whether or not it is best suited to explain or describe aspects of VAWP.

Second, if the preceding examination determines that symbolic violence is, indeed, the most appropriate theory to explain VAWP, the next step for researchers is to prove current assumptions by demonstrating if and how symbolic VAWP operates as a sub-type within a classification of multiple forms of violence. Specifically, scholars must situate symbolic VAWP in relation to its parent concept, expounding on how Bourdieu's core notions of misrecognition and consent operate in the political sphere. From this, socio-psychological forms of violence (where harm is consciously perpetrated and experienced) may be better distinguished from symbolic violence (where no harm is perceived to exist). For example, threats of physical violence provoking protest or resistance on the part of the victim may be excluded as forms of symbolic violence.

The answers to these questions will refine our understanding of symbolic VAWP as a form of violence and help locate it in relation to the typology of VAWP. The preceding analysis suggests that symbolic violence is fundamentally different from other types of VAWP. How, then, can it be interpreted? Is it a cause of acts of "hard" violence (Krook & Restrepo, 2016a; Morgan & Björkert, 2006) or a form of violence unto itself (or both)? Is there a missing step between "hard violence" (physical, sexual, psychological, economic) and symbolic violence, for example other forms of "soft violence" that may consciously/illegitimately contribute to social domination and/or violate rights without threatening the person with direct harm?

Is it a sub-type of socio-psychological violence, existing at the level of the unconscious? Or, as this author has suggested, is it a supra-category, exceeding boundaries of explicit harm or threat of harm, but defining and establishing structures of domination and inequality? (Bardall, 2016) Until these questions are addressed, symbolic violence should be excluded from the typology of forms of VAWP or risk over-extending the concept and diluting it beyond usefulness. Women's political inclusion faces numerous barriers, including both violence as well as structural (sometimes symbolic) obstacles which should be examined and addressed as distinct, though sometimes related, problems.

About the author

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