



# Booklet



## Understanding, Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Women in Election (VAWiE)

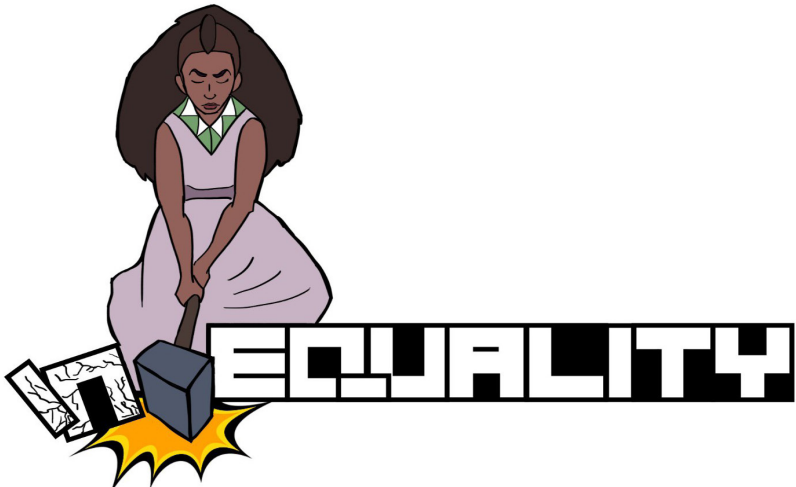
10 February 2025



# Booklet

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Credit: UN Women Cartoon Competition 3<sup>rd</sup> place winner,  
Yonatan Seyoum, 2018

10 February 2025

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## 1. Objective and audience

Research by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) on Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWiE) highlights lack of knowledge, research, and data regarding the issue globally which is also true to Ethiopia. A research was conducted by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) and UN Women aimed to identify the types, causes, and consequences of VAWiE in selected woredas within sampled Sub Cities: Yeka (Addis Ababa), Bahir Dar Zuria (Amhara), Adama Zuria (Oromia), and Wolkite (SNNPR). The findings showed that VAWiE occurs at all stages of the electoral cycle, with survey respondents reporting incidents during pre-election, on election day, and post-election phases. Perpetrators are mainly male, including family members, voters, and political agents, with violence occurring in both domestic settings and public spaces. Key contributing factors include lack of awareness about VAWiE and its prevention and response mechanism among stakeholder and electoral bodies, insufficient legal frameworks, and ethnic political dynamics that harm minority groups.

To address some of the issues raised and discussed within the study in relation to VAWiE including Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWiP), the Network of Ethiopian Women Association (NEWA) and UN Women Ethiopia initiated preparation of this booklet with the purpose of: raise awareness on forms of VAWiE/P, causes and consequences; promote understanding of how VAWiE/P affects women's political participation; provide guidance on how to prevent and address the problem; and support the implementation of action plans by political parties on VAWiE/P.

The booklet is intended to sensitize various stakeholders including election management bodies, CSOs, political parties, and the security sector, on preventing VAWiE/P, and to contribute to narrowing capacity and awareness gaps among justice sector entities, which are key to addressing VAWiE/P in Ethiopia

## 2. Understanding VAWiP and VAWiE

There are various categories of violence against women, and among which are Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWiP) and Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWiE). How is VAWiP and VAWiE different from other forms of violence? The below definitions clearly show different categories of violence against women in the context of politics and election.

Violence against women in political life is any act of, or threat of, gender-based violence resulting in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women that prevents them from exercising and realizing their political rights, whether in public or private spaces, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and to freely campaign, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy the freedom of opinion and expression.’ (UN Women and UNDP (2027), Preventing violence against women in elections, A programming guide)

Table 1: Definition of VAWiE and VAWiP

Type of Violence	Definition	Key Features	Who is Affected?
Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWiE)	Violence targeting women because of their gender in an electoral context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aimed at restricting women’s political participation.</li> <li>- Can be physical, psychological, sexual, or economic.</li> <li>- Occurs during all election cycles (pre-, during, post-election).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Female voters, candidates, observers, election workers, security personnel, grievance hearing committee members, journalists, political party (members, supporters, agents and executives)</li> </ul>
Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWiP)	Gender-based violence against women in political life, beyond elections.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Happens at any time (not only in election periods).</li> <li>- Includes harassment, threats, discrimination.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women politicians, political party members, activists, public officials.</li> </ul>
Electoral Violence	Political violence that affects both men and women during all stages of election.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Aims to influence election results.</li> <li>- Can include ballot tampering, intimidation, riots.</li> <li>- Targets both genders, but disproportionately impacts women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Both men and women (but women face gendered impacts).</li> </ul>

Violence against women in elections (VAWiE) is a form of violence against women intended to impact the realization of women’s political rights in an electoral context. This includes women’s participation as candidates, voters, activists, party supporters, observers, election workers, or public officials. (UN Women and UNDP (2027), Preventing violence against women in elections, A programming guide)

## 2.1 Types and forms of VAWiE

VAWiE is manifested in multiple forms: psychological abuse and intimidation, sexual attacks, physical violence, and economical as detailed in the table below.

Table 2: Types and Forms of Violence Against Women in Elections (V

Types and forms of Violence	Description	Examples	Where it happens
Psychological Violence	It is the frequent and most diverse form of VAWiE intended to intimidate, mistreat, humiliate, degrade, demoralize or bring shame to women, controlling behavior, emotional abuse.	Slander, character attack, insult, threats, hate speech, harassment (including by media/social media), blackmail, false accusations, body shaming, and pressure.	At home, community, in public including online
Physical Violence	Use of force that can cause harm or death.	Pushing, dragging, beating.	Private and public space
Sexual Violence	Non-consensual sexual acts, advances, or harassment, request for sexual favors.	Sexual assault, rape, abuse, harassment, unwanted comments.	Private and public space including online
Economic Violence	Control over financial resources, property damage.	Denial or delay of financial resources and destruction of property.	Private, public (including workplace)

## 2.2 Potential perpetrators of VAWiE

VAWiE can be perpetrated by individuals, groups, political parties, or state actors. The perpetrators can be male or female, a family member or a stranger, an individual or a group. The category of actors and potential perpetrators with examples are shown below.

*Table 3: Potential perpetrators of VAWiE?*

Category	Actors	Examples
Family	Spouses, father, mother, brother, sister, in-laws, cousins	A husband preventing his wife from voting.
Social	Intimate partners, voters, religious leaders, traditional leaders, community members, media, employer and colleagues, activists and youth groups, the media and journalists, criminal elements including non-state armed groups	Activists harassing a female candidate using social media
Political	Political party -members, leaders, election candidates, campaigners, agents, polling station workers	Leading party agent threatening a female candidate from opposition party.
State Actors	Law enforcement (police, and armed forces, security personnel), government bodies, election officials, intelligence agencies, grievance hearing committee members.	Security officers intimidating female voters.

## 2.3 Potential survivors of VAWiE

Survivors of VAWiE can be women aged 18 and above, involved in the electoral process. The potential survivors could be:

- Female voters
- Political aspirants, election candidates & administrators
- Party agents, members, executives
- Observers, journalists & campaigners
- Family members of women in elections
- Election officials and pooling staff
- Political supporters and activists, campaign workers
- Representatives of other state institutions supporting an election
- Media personnel covering elections, civil society representatives working on women's participation in politics and elections

## 2.4. Where and When VAWiE Occurs

VAWiE occurs in private space (at home), or in public places including polling stations, in workplaces, on the way to, and from polling stations, for example during pre-election (registration time and in late evening during election day), practically everywhere, and at any time. In addition, VAWiE occurs in person, and through traditional and social media platforms such as Facebook, twitter, and Instagram; SMS; Youtube, blogs; and in forms of print/text, speech, video or picture.

## 2.5. What contributes to VAWiE?

Several factors contribute to VAWiE, including cultural, legal, political, and social issues. The table below describes the various contributing factors.

Table 4: Contributing Factors to VAWiE

Factor	Description	Examples
Cultural and Social Attitudes	Patriarchal beliefs that exclude women from politics; male dominated and undemocratic political culture	Women seen as unfit for leadership; women seen as inferior and weak for politics and public engagement;
Election Management Gaps	Poor institutional capacity as well as electoral organization that makes women vulnerable.	Lack/limited female security personnel, poor lighting at polling stations, single queue lines (for men and women), too early and too late voting, long distance of the polling station, and lack of reporting mechanism for VAWiE.
Legal and political Short-comings	Lack of comprehensive law or insufficient implementation of the existing legal frameworks	No clear legal framework to prevent and respond to VAWiE.

### 2.5.1 What are the Consequences of VAWiE?

The impact of violence against women during elections is significant, affecting psychological, physical, economic, social, and health aspects, with both short-term and long-term consequences for women, their families, and communities as indicated below

Table 5: Consequence and impact of VAWiE

Consequence	Impact
Physical harm	Disability, injuries, or death.
Economic damage	Loss of income and financial setbacks.
Social crisis	Divorce or broken families
Political Participation decline	Fewer women aspiring for politics and running for office.
Limited voting access	Women are discouraged from voting.
Electoral process weakening	Fewer female election staff and observers.

### 3 Data and statistics on VAWiP/E

According to “Preventing Violence against Women in Politics Guidance Note (UN Women 2021)”, there are incidents of VAWiP/VAWiE recorded from different countries. The below bullets are few reported examples of VAWiP/VAWiE.

#### Global example on VAWiE incidents:

- Colombia (2016): 63% of women candidates reported being victims of violent acts, often perpetrated by colleagues within the same institution or political party.
- Lebanon (2018, post-election): 87% of women candidates experienced psychological violence, including threats, verbal abuse, and online sexual harassment.

#### Examples of incidents of VAWiE in Africa

- Tanzania (2015 elections) :
  - 69% of women candidates reported abusive language, insults, and public humiliation (such as being booed on stage).
  - In some cases, husbands and family members dictated how women should vote.
- Kenya: Women candidates reported that there is a high cost for running for office including rape. The form of violence also includes foul verbal abuse, beatings, abduction, and death threats.

<sup>1</sup> UN Women, ‘Guidance Note, Preventing Violence against Women in Politics’ (2021).

<sup>2</sup> UN Women, 2016. Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWiE) Evidence From 2015 Tanzania General Elections)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> UN Women and UNDP, Summary, Preventing Violence Against Women in Elections: A programme Guide (2018)

**Examples of VAWiE in Ethiopia:** A study conducted following the 6th National Election in Ethiopia documented incidents of Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWiE). Women survey respondents reported experiencing VAWiE at all stages of the electoral cycle, with the highest incidence on Election Day.

- Of the survey participants, many reported psychological violence as the most common form, followed by physical, sexual, and economic violence.
- Psychological violence included intimidation and coercion to vote for a party against the respondent's preference.
- Physical violence involved beatings and, in some cases, torture.
- Sexual violence was mainly harassment, often non-verbal or visual.
- Economic violence included destruction of property such as burning household items and vehicles (e.g., a three-wheeler “bajaj”). These acts aimed to discourage candidates, force them to resign, and limit voter participation.

Qualitative data from key information, focus group discussions, and case studies revealed additional forms of VAWiE, including:

- Preventing women from participating as voters, candidates, observers, election officials, or grievance committee members.
- Tearing down or removing posters of female candidates.
- Coercing voters to elect candidates from the ruling or dominant parties.
- Husbands pressuring wives to vote for candidates of their choice.
- Threats from ruling party supporters using government programs or structures.
- Physical pushing and dragging during long queues at polling stations.
- Expelling women from their homes for returning late from election-related duties.
- Harassment or blackmail through social media, online platforms, or telephone.

While the above examples do not capture the full extent of the problem, they provide clear evidence that VAWiE is not confined to a few countries it occurs everywhere. Women in Ethiopia, regardless of location, have been subjected to psychological, physical, sexual, and economic abuse while performing their political duties during elections, sometimes resulting in severe harm or even death.

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<sup>5</sup> NEBE, UNDP and UN Women (March 2023), Violence against Women in Elections (VAWiE) in Ethiopia: The case of Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regions

## 4. Why to address the problem of VAWiP/VAWiE

As it has been identified from different researches, VAWiP/E are among the factors that limit the participation of women in politics and election. The long-term impact of VAWiE is identified as discouraging women from participating in politics and election. Specifically, for candidates, the long-term impact was found out to be discouragement and dropping out of political careers, or voters being unable to cast their vote for a party of their preference. In addition, the non-representation of women, and their non-participation in election process is a violation of this principle, and the basic principle of protecting human rights - the right to elect, be elected and hold political space in government.

It is only logical to address such issues and enhance their participation in and benefit from political and electoral process. In addition, by getting women into politics and democratic process, more women can get into political leadership. By ensuring balanced participation and representation of women in elections, politics, and decision-making processes, governments can gain several benefits including social and economic. Therefore, it is inevitable to address the issue of VAWiP/E by having appropriate prevention and response mechanism in order to enhance the participation of women in politics and election.

## 5. When and how do we address VAWiP/VAWiE?

Once the concept of VAWiP/E, the causes and consequences, and the need to address the problem is understood. The next step is to devise a plan on when and how to address it. In other words, identify the interventions to prevent and respond to VAWP/VAWiE

### 5.1 When to address VAWiP/VAWiE?

Women face VAWiP and VAWiE while performing their political duties and undertaking variety of roles. In some cases, they are targeted because of their political actions or affiliations, and in others, they are targeted because they are women participating in politics and election. The cyclical nature of election and the occurrence of incidents necessitates, to address VAWiE in all election cycles:

#### **Pre-election period:**

- Awareness raising through public campaigning, including in collaboration with CSOs and human rights and women's right activists.
- Engage influential or public figures to join campaigns.

- Reforming/revising electoral laws, directives, manuals, contents of civic education and voter education programs (content and language) from VAWiE perspective;
- Reviewing party internal documents;
- Identifying potential challenges on women and putting appropriate measures;
- Ensuring assignment of gender balanced electoral administration staff/security personnel;
- Providing the necessary gender-sensitive training on prevention and handling of survivors of VAWiE to various and relevant target groups;
- Putting in place free call services for reporting;
- Put in place knowledge management systems through data collection, undertaking of research, availing resources on the topic.
- Ensuring that VAWiE is included in the reporting formats of observers; and
- Setting up gender sensitive and women friendly polling stations.

- On election day:

- Consider adopting separate voting lines for women and men;
- Ensuring adequate lighting availability around the polling station;
- Providing priority for pregnant, lactating and persons with disability;
- Ensuring that there is no pressure on women to whom to elect; and
- Handling cases of violence against women using survivor centered approach (if happened) and report to NEBE to populate/put it into a database, analyze and follow up on the cases.

- Post-election period:

- Collecting, analyzing and availing data on VAWiE in a confidential manner for post-election review.
- Undertaking comprehensive research on VAWiE; and
- Networking with relevant stakeholders to strategize on further prevention and response mechanisms.

It is important to note that this list is not exhaustive, and some activities may not fall neatly within a single cycle, as they can continue across two or more cycles.

## 5.2 How to address VAWiE/VAWiP

Recognizing VAWiE as a critical issue impacting both women and national development is essential to address the problem through implementation of different interventions. A three-stage strategy can effectively prevent and respond to violence against women in politics and elections (VAWiP/E):

Stage 1: Assessing the gaps/risks

Stage 2: Prevention; and

Stage 3: Response.

In each stage, there are various activities and interventions to be undertaken by various stakeholders.

### Stage 1: Assessing - identifying risks and mapping resources

Various approaches and frameworks can be applied to assess VAWiE. Below are few examples:

- The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) VAWiE assessment tool[ IFES, USAID (2016). Violence Against Women in Elections: A Framework for Assessment, Monitoring and Response], and
- The UN Women VAWiE Prevention and Elimination Matrix.

Note that the IFES assessment tool is currently utilized largely while the UN women framework is used for action planning. A combination of these tools provides a comprehensive assessment opportunity to identify types, forms, and contributing factors related to VAWiE.

In addition, it is important to conduct legal analysis from VAWiE perspective nationally. Based on these assessment principles and tools, a comprehensive legal analysis was conducted during the national VAWiE research conducted by NEBE in collaboration with UN Women (2023) and the findings are summarized below:

*Table 6: Legal provision and gaps to address VAWiE*

Legal Document	Existing Provisions	Gaps	Recommendations
Ethiopian Electoral Proclamation No. 1162/2019	Includes women's political rights.	No mention of VAWiE as a specific crime.	Amend to explicitly define & criminalize VAWiE, or adopt new and standalone law that prohibit or criminalize VAWiE
NEBE Code of Conduct for Security Personnel (2021)	Security officers must prevent sexual violence.	Only sexual violence is covered (no other forms).	Expand to include psychological, economic, and physical forms VAWiE.
Ethiopian Criminal Code	Criminalizes general GBV.	Does not include political harassment.	Amend to penalize gender-based electoral violence.

Although there are legal and policy documents with provisions of gender equality and the rights of women to participate in and benefit from social, economic and political spheres, the Electoral Proclamation fails to consider

VAWiP/VAWiE and its forms in a comprehensive manner. As a result, there is no legal document that explicitly addresses violence against women in politics and election by acknowledging and defining the issue.

### **Stage 2 and stage 3 - Preventing and responding to VAWiE**

To prevent and respond to VAWiP and VAWiE, various stakeholders can be engaged in:

- Establishing a coordination platform to lead the initiative of prevention and response;
- Allocating resources for interventions;
- Assessing the risk of VAWiP/E and available resources for response;
- Create awareness raising platforms including through public campaigns;
- Build the capacity of key stakeholders including through dedicated training sessions, expert meeting and civic education targeting right holders and duty bearers;
- Undertaking legal auditing in terms of VAWiE/P prevention and response and address the gaps through legal review and formulation.
- Identifying and putting in place a clear reporting mechanism for survivors and have a referral protocol;
- Creating communication networks for sharing information via post, phone, SMS, email, online, etc;
- Putting in place services (via free call service, training Grievance Handling Committee members, one stop centers, and others) to survivors using a survivor centered approach[ A survivor-centered approach to gender-based violence (GBV) is a way of working with survivors that focuses on their needs, rights, and safety: The confidentiality, survivors' preference and documentation are the main aspect of the approach. ];
- Providing training to service providers on survivor centered interviewing techniques, documentation and other important aspects of handling cases;
- Put in place mechanisms for sex disaggregated and gender responsive data collection, long term observation and research; and
- Undertake monitoring and evaluation to track implementation of interventions, document lessons to inform follow up actions.

The NEBE VAWiE study conducted in 2023 showed that a comprehensive survivor-centered mechanism for addressing complaints of VAWiE is lacking. Positively, a possible response mechanism was available, which is the grievance redress mechanism provided by the election regulation. Accordingly, a Grievance Hearing Committees (GHC) were established to handle general election related issues at different layers – at polling station, constituency level and the board. This mechanism could be a good entry point for future VAWiE response.

Although response mechanisms were outlined by NEBE, in some polling stations no complaints hearing committees were in place, leaving no mechanism to address VAWiE-related complaints. As indicated by the previous study conducted by NEBE, EWLA had received complaints on VAWiE (pre-election and election day) through the hotline and physical reporting based on case identification and response protocol. According to informants there were cases reported to NEBE and taken to court at various levels: some closed and some discontinued. However, the general finding of the study shows that help seeking behavior in cases of VAWiE is low. It also showed that complaints are made to multiple platforms in the below order, to the police station, Women and Social Affairs Office and to polling station administration, and traditional leaders in all cycles (pre-during and post-election). This was done informally/verbally and formally in writing, and the majority said got satisfactory response. The measures taken were mostly oral warning.

## **6. Actors in preventing and responding to VAWiP/VAWiE**

VAWiE occurs in the family, community and at state level and it is the duty of the state to prevent and appropriately and effectively respond to all forms of violence against women in political life, regardless of who perpetrates it. The government thus, must use different measures to prevent and respond to VAWiP/E.

To effectively implement the preventive and response interventions, it is crucial to have a network led by NEBE, along with appropriate stakeholders. These stakeholders include political parties, the media, the justice sector, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), the Women-led and Women's Right Organizations (WROs), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), academic institutions, the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs kindly replace with this Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA).

### **a) Responsibilities of major stakeholders**

#### **Role of Political Parties**

- Ensure party bylaws explicitly define and prohibit all forms of VAWiE.
- Provide equal access to campaign funding for women candidates.
- Train party leaders and members on gender-sensitive campaigning.
- Establish mechanisms to monitor, report and sanction internal cases of VAWiE.

#### **Role of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE)**

- Integrate VAWiE prevention and response into electoral policies, guidelines and training manuals.
- Ensure equal representation of women as election observers and poll workers.

- Set up accessible, confidential, and safe reporting mechanisms for electoral violence.
- Coordinate with justice and security actors to ensure timely response to VAWiE cases.

### **For Election Officials**

- Ensure polling stations are safe and accessible for women voters.
- Provide election staff with training on preventing and responding to VAWiE.
- Implement survivor-centered response mechanisms, including referral pathways.

### **For security sector**

- Provide protection to women candidates and voters against electoral violence.
- Investigate and prosecute cases of VAWiE promptly and impartially.
- Train security personnel on gender sensitivity and survivors' rights.
- Collaborate with NEBE and justice bodies to ensure coordinated security responses during elections.

## **b) Responsibilities of other stakeholders**

### **For women candidates**

- Report any threats or harassment during campaigns.
- Seek legal and psychosocial support when facing violence.
- Build alliances and solidary networks with other women in politics.
- Use media and advocacy platforms to raise visibility and denounce VAWiE.

### **For Civil Society & Media**

- Monitor, document and report incidents of VAWiE.
- Raise public awareness on electoral gender-based violence and its consequences.
- Advocate for stronger legal protections and accountability mechanisms.
- Promote the engagement of boys and men as allies in preventing VAWiE.
- Role of Academia

### **For Academia and research institutes**

- Conduct research to understand the root causes, extent, and impact of VAWiE.
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for policy and program development.
- Deliver gender-sensitivity and human rights education to political actors and communities.
- Facilitate dialogue platforms to challenge harmful norms perpetuating VAWiE.






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