Violence against women in politics: Reflections on its international conceptualization in dialogue with decolonial feminist thinking

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ABSTRACT

International treaties on Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) have given visibility to a long-overlooked issue (Restrepo Sanín, 2018; Krook, 2020). While influential in shaping national reform processes and normative responses in Abya Yala, these frameworks remain Eurocentric, failing to address the colonial, patriarchal, racist, and heteronormative structures which have shaped the violence that affect women holding elected offices or exercising political power in the region (Curiel, 2014). As a

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result, prevention strategies can be inadequate or insufficient, reinforcing exclusions in political spaces. This paper, drawing on decolonial feminist perspectives, explored how VAWP is conceptualized in the global normative framework, examining six international agreements that address the issue directly or indirectly and that are relevant to Abya Yala. In particular, it focuses on the way the configuration of VAWP relates to the overshadowing of a gendered modern/colonial system of oppression on which globalized predatory capitalist order lies upon. For doing that, we adopt the lens of the imbrication of oppression and the fourfold coloniality framework as key methodological tools, grounded in a decolonial feminist standpoint. The paper approach allows for the disclosure and questioning of the dominant modern/colonial rationality that continues to perpetuate exclusion practices and hinder substantial equality. In this process, it is key to unveil the imbrication of race, sexuality, gender and class that simultaneously affect embodied experiences of oppression and exploitation, both in relation to geographical and corporal territories. It is then argued in favour of a more contextualized approach to VAWP that considers dissident-in-many-ways bodies and their geo-political location, highlighting the differentiated impact of violence.

Keywords: Violence against women in politics; decolonial feminism; global politics; dissident bodies; gendered modern/colonial system of oppression.

Violencia política contra las mujeres: reflexiones sobre su conceptualización internacional en diálogo con el pensamiento feminista decolonial

RESUMEN

Los tratados internacionales sobre violencia contra las mujeres en la política (VAWP, por su sigla en inglés) han visibilizado un problema largamente ignorado. Aunque han influido en los diseños de reformas nacionales y respuestas normativas en Abya Yala, este andamiaje institucional sigue siendo eurocéntrico y no cuestiona las estructuras coloniales, patriarcales, racistas y heteronormativas que moldean la violencia contra las mujeres en cargos políticos en la región. Por eso, las estrategias de prevención siguen siendo insuficientes y hasta excluyentes. Este artículo, en diálogo con el feminismo decolonial, analiza cómo se conceptualiza la VAWP en los acuerdos internacionales relevantes para Abya Yala, examinando seis instrumentos globales que abordan la problemática directa o indirectamente. En particular, nos enfocamos en cómo la definición de esta violencia oculta un sistema moderno/colonial de opresión de género, sobre el que se sustenta el orden capitalista depredador globalizado. Para eso, en nuestro análisis documental exploratorio, empleamos el modelo de la colonialidad

en cuatro dimensiones y la imbricación de opresiones como herramientas analítico-metodológicas claves, en diálogo con la perspectiva feminista decolonial. El enfoque propuesto contribuye a revelar y cuestionar la racionalidad moderna/colonial dominante que reproduce exclusiones y frena la igualdad sustantiva. Además, permite destacar cómo se entrelazan raza, sexualidad, género y clase en las experiencias de opresión y explotación, tanto en territorios geográficos como corporales. Así, se plantea la necesidad de abordar la VAWP desde una mirada contextualizada que considere los cuerpos disidentes en todas sus formas y su ubicación geopolítica, visibilizando el impacto diferenciado de la violencia.

Palabras clave: violencia política contra las mujeres; feminismo decolonial; política global; cuerpos disidentes; sistema moderno/colonial de opresión de género.

INTRODUCTION

On March 14th, 2018, Marielle Franco (PSOL–Socialism and Freedom Party) was assassinated together with her driver, Anderson Gomes. She was a local councilor in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), a black feminist activist belonging to the lesbian community, who was vocal against illegal land appropriations in urban marginalized communities, carried out by paramilitary groups called "militia." Her political femicide shook public opinion, and a great wave of indignation gave rise to a range of advocacy work from different civil society and women's associations (G1, 2018). From that moment Draft nº 349, that was presented by Deputy Rosângela Gomes (PRB-RJ) in 2015, gained visibility in the federal parliament, and in 2021 it was finally translated into Law nº 14.192, on Political Violence against the Woman (Potrich, 2023).

In the United Nations (UN) system, the killing of a woman "for being a woman" with a political role in institutions or in her community is one of the most extreme expressions of a phenomenon known as Violence against Women in Politics (VAWP). It has been framed as "a form of gender-based violence against women (GBVAW). VAWP is any act, or threat, of physical, sexual or psychological violence that prevents women from exercising and realizing their political rights and a range of human rights" (UN Women, 2021, p. 3). However, as United Statesian Black feminism made always very clear, women are never just women (Harris, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). In fact, Marielle Franco's case sheds light on the multidimensional dynamics behind the violence that systematically affects women in politics, where their dissident-in-many-ways bodies[1] are seen as battlefields.

1 Dissident bodies in this context refers to those whose identities, expressions, and existences disrupt dominant social norms and power structures. Rooted in Latin American feminist and queer thought, the term encompasses LGBTQ+ individuals, racialized communities, and others who defy cis-heteronormative, colonial,

Her femicide echoes stories like City Councilwoman Benny Briolly's (PSOL-RJ), a black trans activist belonging to a marginalized community in Niteroi (Brazil), who received death threats by emails and social media on different occasions in 2021 (Muniz, 2020, 2021). In one of these incidents, her perpetrator stated he wished the same type of machine gun, aiming at Marielle on March 14th, would kill her as well. As these attacks escalated, and authorities could not ensure adequate protection measures, she was forced to leave the country (Muniz, 2021). These imbricated patterns of oppression can also be detected in relation to aggressions like those experienced by the current Federal Deputy Daiana Santos (PCdoB-RS) and her colleagues. As a black ex-City Councilwoman from the periphery of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) who has been working closely with social movements, she was one of the seven lesbian lawmakers who reported receiving death threats and threats of "corrective rape" via institutional email, between August 8th and August 24th, 2023 (O Globo, 2023; CNN Brasil, 2023). These assaulting messages explicitly referenced corrective rape as a treatment to "cure lesbianism" as well as a means to suppress their targets' political activity. In subsequent messages, threats escalated detailing planned home invasions, sexual assaults and "political lesbicides"[2].

The imbricated complexity on the ground in terms of VAWP influences and, in turn, is influenced by the international political landscape and its discursive instruments. It is important to recognize that local women authorities' organizations opened the global conversation around gendered-violence and politics in the 1990s, through their advocacy activities starting in Bolivia and Peru (Slaviero, 2023). However, international politics has played a crucial role in shaping how VAWP has come to be discussed, phrased and penalized in Abya Yala[3], especially since the approval of the Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence Against Women in 2015 (Krook, 2020). And we know that concept formation is never a neutral endeavor. United Statesian feminist theorists, such as Donna Haraway (1988) and Sandra Harding (1991), have elaborated on the importance

and patriarchal frameworks (Segato, 2016; Paredes, 2011; Piscitelli, 2009). When these bodies emerge from the "Third World" (Mohanty 1988), belong to racialized or non-white subjects (Vergès, 2020; Anzaldúa, 2000), or hail from the Global South, they occupy a position of double alterity – becoming the "other's other" (Kilomba, 2020). Their radical marginalization necessitates a decolonial analysis that centers their lived experiences and resistances, directly confronting the structures that erase them.

2 The term "lesbicide" (lesbocídio) has been widely used in Latin American feminist discourse to describe the murder of lesbians due to their sexual orientation. However, it has primarily been framed in social and domestic contexts rather than explicitly as a political phenomenon (Gago, 2020).

3 The way the Kuna-Tule people originally called those territories which were later known by the foreign name of "the Americas" (Curiel, 2014, p. 45).

of situated knowledge and reflexivity, as opposed to the fallacy of objectivity. Other Western critical insights, such as Bourdieu and Boltanski (1976), have illustrated that it is through the power of language, symbols and discourse that a "dominant ideology" can be constructed to serve particular interests, without making use of coercive methods. From Abya Yala, decolonial thinkers like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) and Rosalba Icaza (2017) have been reflecting on the power of a "dominant modern/colonial epistemology" (p. 31), used for legitimizing an Eurocentric standpoint as the only " 'zero point' of observation and of knowledge" (p. 29) while displacing all other many ways of understanding and experiencing the world as not fitting with the modern paradigm of universalist knowledge, which falsely claims to be rootless, placeless and disembodied.

Upon these premises, this paper aims at broadening the conversation around the following concerns: how is VAWP conceptualized within the international political framework in relation to Abya Yala? Which bodies and identities are visible in international legal instruments and worthy of institutional protection, and which ones are invisible and forgotten? The approach for our reflection and exploratory analysis will come from a critical feminist standpoint that integrates some theoretical and methodological tools elaborated in decolonial feminism.

Without presuming to take on the immeasurable task of imagining or crafting other ways of thinking and experiencing Global Politics that escape the modern/colonial trap, in this paper we will reflect on the way such trap may take form within those six international conventions that have included or addressed directly VAWP from a feminist standpoint and that have had a direct impact on how the issue has been recognized and handled with in Abya Yala. With that in mind, we will proceed according to the following structure. In the next section, we will discuss the theoretical and methodological premises of the study rooted in decolonial feminist thinking. In the third and fourth sections, we engage in the conceptual debate around VAWP, recalling the way it has emerged in Abya Yala, and we also draw attention to the international treaties and agreements that addressed VAWP in relation to Abya Yala. Finally, we discuss how those international agreements are still profoundly anchored on a dominant modern/colonial rationale, before ending with some closing remarks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: A DECOLONIAL FEMINIST LENS

The complexity of the embodied experiences of VAWP in Abya Yala invites us to approach the international configuration of this phenomenon from a critical and responsible feminist standpoint which interacts with decolonial feminist contributions. To us, this invitation cannot be reduced to an abstract academic exercise responding to a sense of "epistemological culpability" (Curiel, 2014), which can be solved by citing non-hegemonic feminist thinkers here

and there. It neither arises from an arrogant presumption of illustrating any particular method for decolonizing the international political landscape or International Relations studies. Conversely, it represents an effort that rests on a shared genuine urge for intellectual honesty and militant coherence, which has activated a creative convergence from our different latitudes.

In our attempt to reflect on the imbricated embodiment of VAWP and its relations with the international normative framework, decolonial feminist thinking comes to our aid with key epistemological resources for revealing that the complex incarnated experience of oppression is not a matter of plain differences, but it hinges on a bigger historical and geo-political rationale. That resourcefulness is because this perspective has been concerned with the relations between the present *socio-territorial realities* (Rivas, 2017, p. 144) and the historical structures of discrimination and oppression that survived the colonial order imposed with the "invention" of the Americas in 1492 (Woons & Weier, 2017, p. 18). This standpoint is an ongoing project that is emerging from Abya Yala, while it leans on various contributions, such as United States' black and chicana feminisms, postcolonial studies, Latin American autonomous and communitarian feminisms, and finally Western materialist feminist studies questioning the homogeneity of the category of *women*; it also builds upon the concepts of *coloniality of power, knowledge* and *being*, and of *internal colonialism* developed within decolonial studies (Slaviero & Solis Gómez, 2024).

María Lugones, Benny Mendoza, Ochy Curiel and Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso are some of the main referential thinkers of this feminist critical perspective. Their main research focus has been on revealing the multidimensional complexity of the "continuum of colonial-capitalist, racist and heteronormative domination based on social and cultural exclusion and segregation" (Rivas, 2017, p. 147) which is still operating and affecting communities nowadays. For that reason, they have worked around the notions of *modernity* and its "underside" (Icaza, 2017), *coloniality,* as developed by the Modernity/Coloniality research group, and they have problematized the latter by adding an additional layer to it. The original concept of *coloniality of power,* as coined by Aníbal Quijano, referred to geo-political rationality designed by and from the Global North[4] for hierarchically classifying people around the globe by race and categorizing territories in the name of the so-called "development", while establishing a system of international appropriation

4 The Global North is a notion that goes beyond a particular geographical location. It refers to a political, social and economic space that occupies a hegemonic position, as it has displaced those processes that have emerged in territories, realities and collectives "otherwise" (Lugones, 2008). In this sense, it is possible to identify the presence of geo-political "Norths" in the territories recognized as Global South (Espinosa Miñoso, 2022).

and exploitation of workforce, land, bodies and knowledges (Quijano, 1991). The notion was then expanded in order to give visibility to two other salient dimensions, namely the *coloniality of being* and the *coloniality of knowledge*, which unveil the way the "inseparable duality" of *modernity/coloniality* (Icaza, 2017, p. 28) establishes, on one hand, which ontological configurations are acceptable when thinking about possible futures for humanity and, on the other hand, it reinforces the primacy of modern scientific knowledge while hollowing out the legitimacy of the *others.* With the contribution of decolonial feminism, an additional dimension, the *coloniality of gender* (Lugones, 2008), was finally identified and its crucial impact was unpacked. In this way, it became apparent that the existence of a *modern/colonial system of gender* needs to be put in the spotlight (Lugones, 2008, 2011).

The *modern/colonial system of gender* as discussed by decolonial feminists is a prominent theoretical tool that helps to elucidate the way in which *modern* gendered power relations have been introduced in Abya Yala, since its first occupation, and the way they were intertwined with native patriarchal dynamics (Rivas, 2017). On one hand, the *coloniality of power* was on the foundation of a racially-based separation between the occupiers, who enjoyed attributes and abilities associated with human beings, and the occupied population, who did not meet "the standards of humanity" (Icaza, 2017; Lugones, 2008). On the other hand, upon this human/non-human dichotomy, a binary gendered order was established among the former population, through the social categories of "women" and "men", assumed as white, bourgeois and heterosexual, while a male/female sexual dimorphism was attributed to the latter population, the colonized, leading to the most extreme expressions of exploitation and violence against them (Lugones, 2008, pp. 82-99).

Therefore, decolonial feminist thinking evinces that *women* are not a uniform social group because they are affected by discriminatory dynamics that ultimately do not have the same origins. This standpoint moves away from the intersectional methodology of considering multiple categories, like gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and others, as simply supplementary when needed. According to the decolonial feminist critique, even if intersectional perspective were necessary for naming and making visible some of the invisible markers of discrimination, it would still bepremised upon Eurocentric logics of disaggregation, categorization, hierarchical organization and generalization, required to produce *modern* knowledge or, to use Icaza's (2017) wording, a "dominant modern/colonial epistemology". On one hand, these Eurocentric "scientific" procedures have limited the potentiality of the intersectional perspective by fragmenting oppression and representing it as the result of summing burdens, where gender is the heaviest; on the other hand, the intersectional standpoint has not managed to recognize or question the historical as well as the current exploitation

of the geographical and corporal territories in the periphery and their dependency to the Global North (Espinosa Miñoso, 2022; Rivas, 2017).

Therefore, how is oppression thought from a decolonial feminist approach? It is an incarnated experience which is simultaneously multidimensional in a way that resembles the logic of weaving a tapestry (Lugones, 2008, p. 80). This means that: 1) oppression is simultaneously constituted by different social dimensions as if they were warps and wefts; 2) to make sense of the full picture, the "threads" cannot be segmented and separately analyzed; and 3) they are also intertwined with the modern/colonial legacy of a particular territory. The *imbrication of oppression* is, then, another key tool that decolonial feminist thinking provides for the visible and the invisible logics behind the colonial/modern system of gender to be exposed, together with the unveiling of the most embodied and tangible economic sides of oppression within the modern neoliberal paradigm of body, land and knowledge exploitation (Lugones, 2008; Masson, 2011). In line with that, it challenges the universality of whiteness which is taken as a given within traditional Eurocentric feminist studies when examining oppression and violence (Espinosa Miñoso, 2014; Rivas, 2017). It also elaborates as to how women from the Global South are easily depicted as lacking voice, autonomy and power, as well as how their countries or communities are quickly assumed to be "not yet developed" on the race towards *modernity*, which is apparently universal but implicitly Western (Curie, 2014; Espinosa Miñoso, 2022; Spivak, 2003 [1988]).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Engaging in a dialogue with decolonial feminist thinking and some of its key theoretical contributions, this article adopts a qualitative exploratory documentary analysis of six international normative instruments that address, either directly or indirectly, the phenomenon of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) in Abya Yala. These documents were selected based on their formal recognition by regional or global institutions such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States, their influence in shaping national legal and policy frameworks in Latin America, and their engagement—explicit or implicit—with categories relevant to gender-based political violence. In fact, they either address the issue specifically, or they incorporate it as part of the wider notion of *violence against women*.

The exploratory analysis is grounded in a decolonial feminist epistemology, drawing from the conceptual frameworks of the coloniality of power, knowledge, being, and gender (Quijano, 1991; Lugones, 2008; Icaza, 2017; Vergès, 2020), as well as the notion of imbricated oppression (Lugones, 2008). These concepts were operationalized into four analytical axes which oriented the reading of each treaty, reflecting the diversity of dissident-in-many-ways realities and territories, relevant to the context in Abya Yala, both in historical, geographical,

material and corporal terms. To assess these four dimensions, the analysis followed a set of critical and comparative guiding questions: which political subjects and territories are rendered visible and worthy of protection? Which forms of violence are recognized and which remain unspeakable or unnamed? Are colonial structures of domination named as such, or erased under the guise of neutral universality? Are race, class, gender, and sexuality addressed as interlocking systems of domination or merely listed as separate indicators of vulnerability? Finally, to what degree has a feminist conceptualization of VAWP been exposing and questioning the gendered modern/colonial system of oppression, or has it concealed and reinforced the dominant Eurocentric modern/colonial rationality?

This methodological strategy reflects a commitment to reflexivity and political accountability in knowledge production. Rather than seeking generalizable outcomes, the aim is to reveal the conditions under which certain identities, bodies, and experiences are made legible within international law, while others are structurally silenced. It also responds to the need for analytical transparency by clearly stating the criteria and dimensions through which each document was examined. In doing so, it challenges the apparent neutrality of international legal instruments and exposes the continued operation of a dominant modern/colonial rationality that undergirds global frameworks addressing violence against women in politics. In this way, this exploratory documentary analysis serves also as a preliminary approach for deeper examinations as to how international, regional and national normative instruments have incorporated critical perspectives on discrimination and violence against women in politics.

The six treaties taken into consideration in the analysis are displayed in *Table 1*. They were read in their official versions (English, Spanish or Portuguese) and examined in relation to these questions, without relying on a rigid coding scheme. Instead, the approach emphasized close, situated reading attentive to silences, inclusions, omissions, and discursive framings. Particular attention was paid to legal definitions, categories of subjects, recognized forms of violence, and the discursive logics that support institutional protection mechanisms. Through this exercise we hope to cultivate and expand the conversation around the multidimensional incarnated imbrication of oppression, in relation to sexuality, gender, race, class and colonial legacy, and its implications within the VAWP international normative framework.

THE CONCEPT OF *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS*

Abya Yala women's movements, at the local level, had a crucial role in opening up a path for naming and defining the phenomenon that has been recognized as a violation of human rights with a profound impact on the quality of democracy (Restrepo Sanín, 2018, p. 164; Slaviero, 2023). As early as the 1990s, the Association of Locally Elected

TABLE 1. INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS RELEVANT TO THE CONCEPT CONFIGURATION OF VAWP IN ABYA YALA

Year	Convention / Document	Organization / Organism
1979	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	United Nations General Assembly
1994	Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Belém do Pará Convention)	Organization of American States (OAS)
2015	Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence Against Women	Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI), Organization of American States (OAS)
2015	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development	UN General Assembly
2017	Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women in Political Life	Organization of American States (OAS)
2021	Guidance Note on Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics	UN Women

Source: Developed by the authors.

Women of Bolivia (ACOBOL) had begun to identify the hostile response towards women's involvement in politics, which was increasing with the adoption of a gender quota legislation (Law 1779) in 1997 (Rivetti, 2024). During the same period, similar attitudes began to be detected by some newly-established regional networks of women-elected authorities in Peru, which later gathered around the National Network of Women Authorities (RENAMA) in 2008 (Slaviero, 2023). Again, such a hostile response towards women politicians was identified after the implementation of a gender quota law in the country.

The advocacy work of these local organizations, first in Bolivia and Peru shortly after, drew attention to such a problem, that "had no name" (Restrepo Sanín, 2018, p. 15), by calling it "*acoso político*" or *political harassment*. Rather than downplaying the intensity of the matter, this initial definition had the objective of providing a conceptual framework that helped clearly differentiate it from traditional forms of political violence (Restrepo Sanín, 2018). In Bolivia, ACOBOL discussed the topic in Congress using the term *political harassment* as early as 2001, and it drafted an *Anteproyecto de Ley contra el Acoso Político* (a legislative proposal against political harassment) where a distinction was made between traditional political violence and the apparently new gender-based phenomenon which referred to violent strategies to discipline women elected members' bodies, decisions and actions and prevent them from questioning male traditional authority (Machicao Barbery, 2004). In Peru, the same term "acoso político" was used to distinguish it from

the political violence associated with the 1990-2000 internal armed conflict (Slaviero, 2023).

The experience of Bolivian and Peruvian women's mobilization around *political harassment* had a broad impact across the region and beyond, while the phrasing kept evolving. In 2010, the Latin American Network of Associations of Women Authorities within the Local Government (RED LAMUGOL), which was created a few years earlier, brought together the national associations of women authorities campaigning in Bolivia, Peru, Colombia and Ecuador, for attending its first Andean Convention. On that occasion, the final statement made a direct reference to *violence against women candidates and elected authorities* as a barrier that hindered women's political participation and that needed to be urgently addressed (Red LAMUGOL & RENAMA, 2010). Then, in 2012 Bolivia marked a global milestone when adopting Law n°243, the first piece of legislation for preventing and responding to *Political Harassment and Violence against Women*. However, it was only in 2015 that the very first international convention focusing specifically on the issue took place and it was in Lima, Peru, within the framework of the Follow-Up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention, established in 1994 for the eradication of violence against women. On that occasion, the first international Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence Against Women was crafted.

Boosted by a recently globalized conversation on VAWP, a number of countries across Abya Yala adopted specific legislations: Panamá in 2020[5], Peru[6] and Brazil[7] in 2021, Costa Rica[8] in 2022, and finally Colombia[9] on April 2nd, 2025. In addition, VAWP as a category was added to the existing laws against gender-based violence in countries like Bolivia (2013), Paraguay (2016), Uruguay (2018), Ecuador (2018), Argentina (2019), Mexico (2020), El Salvador (2021), and Venezuela (2021), while the concept was integrated within the electoral regulatory framework in Bolivia (2018), Ecuador (2020), Mexico (2020), Brazil (2021) and Dominican Republic (2023) (Albaine, 2024).

Broad comparative studies have provided key insights as to why VAWP has been a nameless or "hidden problem" (Krook, 2020, pp. 3-8), either for remaining unspoken or being silenced. In this perspective,

5 Law 184 against Political Violence against the Woman/ Violencia política contra la Mujer.

6 Law 31.155 against Harassment against Women in Political Life/ Acoso contra las Mujeres en la Vida Política.

7 Law 14.192 against Political Violence against the Woman/ Violência Política contra a Mulher.

8 Law 10.235, against Violence against Women in Politics/ Violencia contra las Mujeres en la Política.

9 Law 2453, Abril 2nd 2025, through which measures are established to prevent, address, reject, and punish violence against women in politics and to enforce their right to participation at all levels.

research reveals the international pervasiveness of the phenomenon, as it affects women politicians for being women all around the globe. In the 2016 UIP comparative study examining 39 countries across Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Americas and Arabia, it is shown that 81.8% of women parliamentarians were affected by psychological violence, while 25,5% of them were targets of physical violence (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016).

International comparative insights have also provided tools for identifying common patterns of motives and manifestations, which strengthened the going-global process of concept formation started locally by councilwomen associations and civil society organizations. In this turn, three categories were initially applied for making sense of the variety of VAWP expressions, coinciding with the three dimensions of violence against women previously established in international conventions (physical, sexual and psychological). However, later new categories such as economic (Bardall, 2011), symbolic (Rivetti, 2024) and semiotic violence (Krook, 2020) have been identified. Also, across this classification a common pattern has been highlighted: VAWP represents a "message-crime" as it is directed to individuals, but it projects a sense of hostility and fear to the targeted collective group (p. 109).

In addition, the international comparative approach contributed to the deepening of global understanding of the origins of VAWP. Krook (2020, pp. 52-60) found that the phenomenon might be related to three possible scenarios: (1) it could be understood in the frame of the long-standing male hostility towards women's involvement in the political realm and in the decision-making process; (2) it could also be an expression of a new polarized way of doing politics facilitated by changes in communication technologies and the rise of fake news; or (3) it could be a new hostile response that has to do with women's increasing participation in political institutions. Other important contributions suggest that this form of gendered violence finds its roots in the divide between the public and the private sphere, which in turn justifies a binary sexual division of labor that has marginalized women from the decision-making process and the exercise of power (Aranda Frizz, 2024).

While an international comparative approach to VAWP has been beneficial to broaden debates and amplify global attention, a second perspective emerging from Abya Yala has reclaimed the importance of focusing on the local context and the territorial peculiarities when examining VAWP, taking into consideration specific socio-political aspects of each country. This locally rooted perspective underlines the sexist, racial and colonial structures that have historically constituted power relations in Abya Yala (Souza & Biroli, 2023; Matos, 2022; Da Silva, 2022; Do Rosario, 2022). This approach puts in the spotlight the integrated relationship between the multiple dimensions of white, male, cis-heteronormal hegemony. It also contends that current expressions of domination, oppression and violence need to be understood

as intrinsically related to the racist legacies of colonialism and to the cultural and ontological dependency between the territories of Abya Yala and the former and newer colonial powers nowadays (Rivas, 2017). In this sense, this approach includes developments of the notion of *body-territory* as the preferential place to which directing colonial depredation and violence in the Latin American context, but also the landscape for organizing resistance (Souza & Biroli, 2023). This goes hand in hand with the concept of *dissident bodies* and the claim that a rootless international comparative framework misses to address dimensions of VAWP that are relevant to women's experience in Abya Yala.

Moreover, from this standpoint, VAWP becomes resignified within the current stage of democratic erosion and a new wave of "racial colonial and neoconservative repatriacalization (of) Latin American (politics)" (Matos, 2022, p. 219). This is happening while women's increasing numbers in political institutions puts under greater pressure the global male-oriented way of doing politics. At the same time, it is underlined that when conceptualizing political violence against women, gender and sexuality is imbricated with racial and ethnic connotations. Important insights also stress the hostile continuity between the patriarchal violent response to women within politics and gender-based violence and abuse against women within society (Albaine, 2024; Biroli *et al.,* 2020).

THE CONCEPT OF *VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS* ACROSS THE INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Historically, the advancement of this concept within international normative frameworks has been driven by some convergence across feminist movements, international institutions, and state efforts to promote women's full participation in public and political life. Over the past decades, several treaties, conventions, and declarations have been developed to address this issue, gradually shaping a global agenda committed to eradicating violence against women in the political sphere worldwide.

One of the earliest and most significant milestones in this regard was the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. CEDAW is considered the most comprehensive international treaty dedicated to the protection of women's rights. It defines discrimination against women as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction based on gender that impairs or nullifies the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of women's human rights across various spheres, including politics, economics, health, and education. The convention obliges signatory states to take necessary legislative and institutional measures to eliminate discrimination and promote gender equality (United Nations, 1979). While CEDAW was not initially focused on violence against women, it laid the foundation for later instruments that explicitly addressed

gender-based violence as a human rights violation.

Building upon this framework, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women (Belém do Pará Convention, in Brazil) was adopted in 1994 by the Organization of American States (OAS). This convention was groundbreaking in its explicit recognition of gender-based violence as a public and private issue that hinders women's equality. It defines violence against women as any act based on gender that causes death or physical, sexual, or psychological harm and obliges states to implement policies aimed at preventing and combating such violence (Organization of American States, 1994). By linking gender-based violence to broader human rights violations, the Belém do Pará Convention provided a regional framework that strengthened legal mechanisms for addressing violence in Abya Yala.

As international awareness of VAWP grew, efforts to define and address this specific form of gender-based violence gained prominence across countries in Abya Yala. In 2015, the Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence Against Women was adopted during the Sixth Conference of States Party to the Belém do Pará Convention. This declaration was instrumental in expanding the understanding of political violence, identifying it as actions, behaviors, and practices that seek to prevent, limit, or restrict women's participation in political life. The document underscored that political violence is not only a challenge in authoritarian regimes, but also a persistent issue in the so-called democracies, where women in positions of power often face threats, harassment, and structural barriers that undermine their political engagement (Organization of American States, 2015).

The same year, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by UN Member States, reinforcing a global commitment to gender equality. Among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG N°5 – Gender Equality specifically calls for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, including in political and public spaces. The agenda emphasizes that gender equality and women's empowerment are essential for sustainable development, urging states to ensure women's full and effective participation at all levels of decision-making (United Nations, 2015). This framework situates political violence against women within a broader global "development" agenda, reinforcing its importance as a systemic issue requiring comprehensive policy interventions.

In response to the increasing visibility of VAWP, the Inter-American Model Law on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women in Political Life was introduced by the OAS in 2017. This model law serves as a guideline for countries in Abya Yala to develop or refine their legislation on political violence, providing a neat definition of its forms – including discrimination, harassment, and direct attacks against women in political office, electoral campaigns, or public leadership roles. The model law also offers concrete

normative mechanisms that seek to protect female candidates, elected officials, and political activists from acts that undermine their right to participate in governance and decision-making processes (Organization of American States, 2017).

More recently, in 2021, UN Women published the Guidance Note on Preventing Violence Against Women in Politics, further advancing the discussion on how to prevent and respond to gender-based political violence. The document highlights that political violence is one of the most significant barriers to gender equality in governance, discouraging women from running for office, participating in electoral processes, and assuming leadership roles. It offers a toolkit for practical strategies for governments, political parties, and electoral institutions, including awareness campaigns, legal reforms, reporting mechanisms, and protective measures for victims (UN Women, 2021).

DECOLONIAL GAPS IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF VAWP

The international instruments presented above form a robust legal and political framework for addressing VAWP from an institutionalized and global approach. In this sense, they strengthen a growing global commitment for ensuring women's equal participation in political life. However, when digging into the international framework in search of those bodies and identities which are visible and worthy of institutional protection, and those which are invisible and forgotten, it shows the wounds of a gendered capitalist modern/colonial system of oppression which is still lacerating possible convergences from different latitudes.

Our reflections can be organized around four main interconnected voids that affect the configuration of VAWP within the international normative framework, in terms of its relationship with the gendered modern/colonial system of oppression.

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN VAWP, THE COLONIAL/HISTORICAL LEGACY AND CURRENT GLOBAL DYNAMICS OF OPPRESSION RELATED TO THE COLONIALITY OF POWER, GENDER, KNOWLEDGE AND BEING

Colonial heritage is broadly forgotten across the body of analyzed conventions, apart from two brief exceptions. "Colonialism", "neocolonialism", and "colonial domination" are mentioned concisely in the 1994 Belém do Pará Convention. The main tendency here is on associating them with notions related to nation-States as a whole and their borders, such as "interference in the internal affairs of States", "national integrity", "aggression", "foreign occupation" "national sovereignty" and "self-determination". However, they are discussed in relation to "racial discrimination" on one occasion. Even when "neo-colonialism" is mentioned, there is no place for exposing the linkage between violence, oppression or discrimination, and the past or present modern/colonial erasure of non-Eurocentric ways of living, imaging, understanding

and shaping the world. The idea of "colonial and foreign occupation" appears in the 2015 Resolution of the 2030 Agenda as well, in a very concise manner, in relation to the "right of self-determination of people", and the impact of their "economic and social development as well as their environment", but not in relation to differentiated forms violence. All that considered, the bodies and territories that remain unspeakable and unnamed when focusing on this void are the ones that have endured historical and present forms of colonization.

The relationship between VAWP and the specificity/diversity ff global socio-territorial realities, beyond stereotypes related to the modern eurocentric neoliberal concept of development/democracy

As colonial legacies remain unspoken in most of the analyzed international instruments, the relations between VAWP and the specificity/diversity of global *socio-territorial realities* do not manage to come to the surface or move beyond the stereotypes related to the dominant conceptualizations of development and democracy. The international normative framework is, then, missing the opportunity to enhance the possibility of understanding and experiencing violence and VAWP in ways "otherwise". Violence is mostly phrased with reference to a rigid set of limited categories, but there are exceptions to this: in the definitions incorporated in the 2017 Inter-American Model Law and in the 2021 Guidance Note it says that VAWP "may include but is not limited to" some given categories. This wording is designed to move beyond the traditional physical-sexual-psychological trilogy. In line with that, reference is made to the importance of local knowledge and to "work closely with organizations at the local level as they have the best understanding of community social, cultural and economic dynamics and realities" only in the latter normative instrument (UN Women, 2021).

However, this does not automatically give visibility to knowledge "otherwise" that is delinked from the placeless and disembodied dominant modern/colonial discourse. In fact, the only references to different local communities can be found in the 1979 CEDAW Convention and the 2030 Agenda: there they are associated with rural communities in an essentialist way, envisaging their engagement and adjustment in accordance with the given development planning, instead of the pursuit of their own-crafted tailored resistance strategies. In this line, in the 2030 Agenda an orientation towards capacity building for adaptation to climate change is added. This framing reinforces the "subalternization" (Segato, 2021) of marginalized and *dissident-in-many-ways* bodies, reinforcing modern/colonial hierarchies of power. In line with this specific void, then, the bodies and territories that remain silenced and invisible are the ones that are place-rooted and showing agency when crafting resistance strategies that are locally based.

The relationship between VAWP and the incarnated economic circumstances that are produced by globalized capitalist modern/colonial power relations between and within countries

Tangible and embodied economic consequences of the capitalist modern/colonial order, dovetailing a peripheries-to-the-center logic, are not discussed nor mentioned in the normative instruments in terms of extractivism, peripheral/economic dependency, land appropriation, exploitation and expropriation, economic dependency of peripheral territories, inequitable distribution of economic resources. In this way, the key relationship between VAWP and those modern/colonial economic and material circumstances that generate "sites" of structural vulnerability, both in terms of geographical and corporal territories, is overshadowed. Conversely, attention is drawn to embodied economic circumstances like "migration" and "forced displacement", "trafficking" and "forced prostitution". This wording can be found in the 1979 and 1994 Conventions and the 2030 Agenda, the three agreements which do not address VAWP specifically, but include attacks in the public sphere within the wider notion of *violence against women*. However, the geo-political and economic significance of these issues is not presented and the peripheries-to-the-center logic of *modernity/coloniality* remains silenced. In fact, the discussion of these economic dimensions is oriented towards "natural disasters", "humanitarian crises" and "terrorism", while there is no reference to the international division of labor, extractivism or land expropriation/exploitation. In the 2030 Agenda we can also identify references to "forced labor" and "modern slavery" that follow the same logic. Violence is still treated as an individual or legal issue, without a comprehensive critique of the modern/colonial depredatory rationale that is silently fueling it. In this way, economic extractivism and expropriation, racist peripheral dependency and the marginalization of non-Western forms of knowledge are dismissed. In this case, then, the bodies and territories that remain unspoken are those that have been impoverished.

The simultaneous imbrication (and not the hierarchical categorization or fragmented summing) of gender, race, sexuality, class and other markers of discrimination in order to explain the differentiated origins and impacts of VAWP

The complexity of the inseparable intertwining of modern/colonial markers of discrimination and oppression remains unattended, and that can be observed across all the six treaties and conventions examined. Across the normative framework, great emphasis is placed on listing race, ethnicity, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or others as important variables to consider when protecting women's rights. However, no stress is placed on unpacking their interweaving dynamics and recognizing their deeply imbricated

importance when designing policies and programs for preventing VAWP and attending targeted women. Concerns for racial discrimination, colonialism, neocolonialism and women in situations of poverty were expressed in 1979 CEDAW showing some initial attention to globalized structural factors of oppression and violence. However, at that time it did not translate into a comprehensible approach to violence experienced by women in their dissident-in-many-ways bodies. In the 2021 Guidance Note we still find no place for reflecting on the inseparable simultaneity of discrimination markers that respond to the modern/colonial exploitation of geographical and corporal territories. Conversely, discrimination dimensions are briefly framed in an arithmetical manner as "multiple and intersecting", therefore leading some groups to experience conditions of "more" vulnerability. This suggests that even when the intersectional perspective is applied, the understanding of oppression and violence does not move away from Eurocentric scientific processes of categorization, disaggregation and hierarchical organization. When focusing on this void, then, we can say that the bodies and territories that remain unnamed and silenced are the ones located within the deeply imbricated dynamics of modern/colonial oppression.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The femicide of Marielle Franco in 2018 serves as a stark reminder of the incarnated dangers faced by women engaging in politics, who challenge entrenched power structures with their dissident-in-many-ways bodies – in this case black, mother, lesbian and working-class. As an openly lesbian Afro- Brazilian councilwoman from Rio de Janeiro, Franco was a vocal advocate for racial justice, LGBTQIA+ rights, and land ownership in marginalized communities. Her femicide does not represent just an attack on an individual, but a direct assault on the political representation of historically colonized bodies and communities. This aligns with what Curiel (2014), Vergès (2020) and Kilomba (2000) describe as a current global system of domination where racism, heteropatriarchy and coloniality converge and intertwine.

Our exploratory analysis of the international normative framework around VAWP is in line with this claim, highlighting the way in which *modernity* and *coloniality* together are still simultaneously resisting good intentions. Despite raising awareness on gender-based violence in political spaces and enhancing conversations around the globe around an unspoken "hidden problem" (Krook, 2020, pp. 3-8), international treaties and agreements fall short in addressing the imbricated embodiments of VAWP.

Disregarding the specific political, social, and cultural contexts in which violence is rooted, the ostensibly neutral universality of human rights international law overshadows the complex histories of subjugation and resistance that shape the experiences of marginalized bodies and groups, thereby reinforcing exclusionary practices within a

discourse that claims inclusivity, as Otto (2006) highlights. That is to say that, by silencing the modern/colonial logics of Eurocentric capitalist order, the bodies that remain invisible and forgotten are many. In fact, the erasure does not only regard the lived violent realities of those individuals who "upset the naturalness of dominant gender scripts" (p. 354), but it concerns the embodiment of all individuals who upset the naturalized/enforced promises of the dominant gendered modern/colonial rationality – non-white, gender-dissident, non-bourgeois, peripherical, displaced and expropriated bodies (Kilomba, 2000; Mohanty, 1988).

We showed that in the existing international normative framework VAWP conceptualization has not yet exposed the gendered modern/colonial system of oppression. This concealment has taken shape through what we understand as four main interconnected voids. They include a) colonial legacy and coloniality; b) global socio-territorial diversity; c) incarnated economic consequences of predatory global capitalism; and d) imbrication of oppression markers. In other words, we can argue that in the existing international normative framework VAWP has a modern/colonial configuration. What we addressed as *modernity/coloniality* constitutes an "inseparable duality" "which is not to be conflated (into) a binary" (Icaza, 2017, p. 28). While modernity is the visible side, which can be observed in the form of the dominant modern rationality and global predatory designs, its "underside", coloniality, remains concealed yet very actively engaged in fueling its topside.

Our reflection dialogues with the concerns of another major decolonial feminist thinker, Rita Segato (2021), who contends coloniality as not being confined to the past but persisting in contemporary systems of domination – particularly through gender violence, structural racism, and the exclusion of indigenous and afro-descendant praxis and knowledge. In other words, Western forms of knowledge production have historically legitimized the subalternization of marginalized groups, reinforcing hierarchies of power that continue to shape global inequalities. In fact, the crafting process of these agreements reflects the dismissal of knowledge "otherwise", as the participation of actors from the Global North had a greater influence than decolonial feminist thinkers/activists and other peripherical movements. While many ways of living "otherwise" keep on being silenced, the bright endurance of dissent-in-many-ways bodies raising their voices cannot be easily overshadowed. In 2020, keeping alive Marielle Franco's legacy, her life partner and widow, Mônica Benício, was elected as a City Councilwoman in Rio de Janeiro (Bauer, 2020). Many others followed her example, demonstrating that despite extreme VAWP, lesbian women and other dissident-in-many-ways identities will continue to resist and reclaim political spaces. However, it is a type of resilience that we cannot be asking for: its recognition does not pay back its unbearable costs.

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