

Lift Her Up: Power and Control Wheel for Women in Political Office

2021-10-18

Introduction

Decisions, comments, and actions made by and about our society's leaders - our elected officials - have a direct impact on the culture we live in. When actions occur in the political sphere that abuse, demean, or disempower women, it reinforces a message of misogyny that underpins all violence against women. The exacerbation of a power dynamic where men use violence against women in politics sustains and creates a social license for a broader culture of misogyny and violence against women in all spheres.

In early December 2016, a crowd of approximately one thousand demonstrators, mostly men, gathered outside the Alberta Legislature in Edmonton, Canada, chanting "lock her up" about the Premier and leader of the Alberta provincial New Democratic Party, Rachel Notley. The group was there to protest an environmental tax but the gathering quickly shifted into a personal attack on the then Premier. This was not the first attack of its kind in Alberta, however, its scale and scope provided the general public a window into the experiences of women in politics across the province and the country.

The targeting of women as women in the political sphere is analogous to the domestic sphere. By using the building blocks of culturally accepted gendered norms and stereotypes and applying a consistent and pervasive threat of violence, men establish power and control for themselves through a variety of tactics that sustain a context of fear, limiting women's agency. The tactics used to support this dynamic in the political and domestic spheres are similar and systemic.

Role of Women's Shelters

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) is the provincial network organization of women's shelters in Alberta. ACWS supports 40 members operating over 50 shelters across the province for women, children, and seniors facing domestic abuse. The primary activity of women's shelters is to offer a safe place for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Shelters see first-hand the effects of structures that foster gender inequality, and they have a unique perspective on points of leverage to affect change, informed by the lived experiences of the women accessing their services.

It was ACWS Shelter Directors who identified the link between the abusive treatment of women in politics

Suggested Citation:

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2021). *Lift Her Up: Power and Control Wheel for Women in Political Office*. Edmonton, AB.

Extracted from full report available from the ACWS website here:

https://acws.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021-10-12_LiftHerUpReport.pdf

and women in abusive domestic relationships. Understanding the ripple effects of any violence perpetrated against women as women, they united to take action to raise awareness about the violence perpetrated against women in politics which gave rise to the Lift Her Up Campaign.

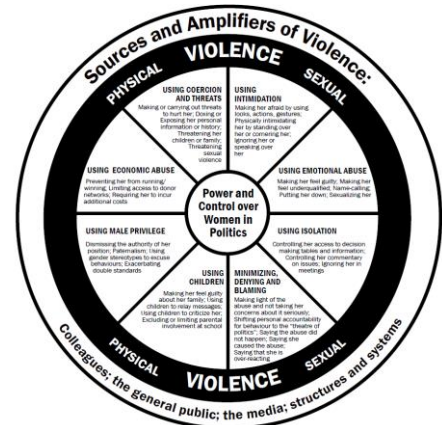
Project Scope

The research context for this study is centered on the experiences of women in Alberta, Canada, who have run for and/or held political office at the school board, municipal, provincial, or federal level. Seventeen individuals participated in focus groups and interviews held between 2018 and 2021.


Diversity of experience and background of participants was key to ensuring the validity of the information gathered and, as such, the project researchers actively sought and interviewed participants representing multiple groups. Participants included individuals who were both successful and unsuccessful in their campaigns for public office, candidates from rural and urban areas, candidates in government and opposition, and candidates from various levels of public office. They represent diverse ethnicities, races, religions, ages, political beliefs, and economic groups. Participants also reflected diverse family status, marital status, and sexualities. The study explored the experiences of women in politics as women, recognizing that women with additional diversity factors, particularly Black, Indigenous, and Women of Colour, 2SLGBTQI+, and gender non-conforming women, are more likely to face more frequent and more extreme violence.

Findings: Power and Control Wheel

Using the foundation of the Duluth Model of Power and Control¹ and directly informed by the experiences of women in politics, ACWS has developed an adaptation of the Power and Control Wheel to describe the nature of violence against women in politics. Violence directed toward women in the political sphere manifests in a variety of ways and can come from multiple sources. These manifestations are derivations of multiple tactics performed by various individuals, groups, and systems, and operate collectively to create a consistent threat of violence against women in politics and sustain the experience of fear in the subject. Though the tactics are not necessarily coordinated, they amplify one another to create a context where the threat becomes pervasive.



¹ Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs: Home of the Duluth Model. "Wheel Information Center" [theduluthmodel.org URL:https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/](https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/) Accessed October 2021.



The wheel is a summary representation of the breadth of tactics commonly used to create and sustain this dynamic. Not every woman in politics who experiences violence will experience all the tactics listed nor will she necessarily experience them with the same frequency or to the same degree. Not every agent of that violence will employ all tactics listed. Every experience of violence is unique and the breadth and depth of how these tactics are used are different in each instance. The effect on each individual will also be different, depending on a variety of factors, including the scope and source of the violence and that individual's personal history. Nonetheless, there remains a consistent experience of violent threat and resulting fear for one's own safety or autonomy.

Outer Ring

In developing the Power and Control Wheel for Women in Political Office, the dynamic of violence emerged differently, with multiple, overlapping sources creating, amplifying, and exacerbating the threat of violence. Survivors reported experiencing threats and acts of violence in multiple contexts, combined with additional systemic factors that heightened male dominance and privilege, limiting their ability to equally participate in politics without fear of attack.

The study identified four primary sources employing these power tactics - colleagues, including other elected officials or candidates, their staff/volunteers, and public sector employees in positions of power; the general public, including a representative's constituents and individuals using social media; the media, including television, radio, and the internet; and structures and systems that limit women's equal participation, including the physical layout of buildings, leave provisions, policies for addressing harassment, and more.

As individuals have agency both independently and collectively, each of the "Sources and Amplifiers of Violence" also have the power to limit the violence employed by other groups and to intervene to foster a more safe and equal culture.

Tactics

Through research and interviews with survivors about their lived experience, it became clear that the categories of tactics used to wield power over women in the political sphere align closely with those used in violent domestic relationships, however the way those tactics are expressed vary. As such, the wedges of the Power and Control wheel for women in politics mirror the original wheel design, with variance in the description of each aspect.

Also, as there are multiple sources employing the various tactics, there are various methods and venues in which each controlling tactic can manifest. In the case of women in politics, the power and control tactics were found to take place in private, in public, online, and within institutional contexts such as council meetings and legislative sessions.

For an example of how the tactics shifted for this version of the wheel, we can isolate the "Using Intimidation" wedge. In the original wheel focused on domestic violence, these tactics

included things like Making her afraid by using looks, actions, gestures...smashing things....destroying her property...abusing pets...and displaying weapons.

In the case of women's experiences in political office, study participants frequently referenced the use of intimidation tactics as a way of limiting their ability, opportunity, or confidence to participate in politics. Examples of actions designed to create a sense of fear in another included experiences like: having a male colleague purposefully stand uncomfortably close to them in otherwise open spaces, having a group of elected officials collectively make enough noise that her voice would be drowned out in a debate or at an event, having constituents or colleagues ignore them when speaking during meetings, limiting her access to the microphone or providing less speaking time at events, or having individuals follow them to their cars after work or public engagements. Participants reported these tactics taking place one-on-one, in groups, in person, and online.

In addition to the experiences designed to intimidate shared by study participants, there have been numerous public reports of this type of behaviour employed to diminish women's presence in politics. In a town hall-style debate leading up to the 2016 United States presidential election, Donald Trump followed Hillary Clinton around the stage, standing closely behind her as she addressed the audience.² In 2020, during the American Vice-presidential debate, then Vice-president Mike Pence frequently interrupted or spoke over candidate Kamala Harris enough that her reply of "I'm speaking" resonated widely enough to become the source of both internet memes and merchandise.³

The full version of the project [report](#) contains a detailed explanation of each of the tactics shared by women who participated in the study, supported by high profile examples that are listed in the Power and Control Wheel for Women in Political Office.

Recommendations


As part of its Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations has highlighted gender equality as a key factor in building "peace and prosperity for people and the planet."⁴ Target 5.5 points specifically to ensuring "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life."⁵ As more women stand for elected office increase, awareness and understanding of

² Jamieson, Alastair. "2016 Presidential Debate: Trump Accused of 'Stalking' Clinton on Stage" *nbcnews.com* October 10, 2016. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/2016-presidential-debates/presidential-debate-trump-accused-stalking-clinton-stage-n663516>

³ Morris, Seren. "Kamala Harris 'I'm Speaking' Debate Moment Sparks Memes and Merchandise" *newsweek.com* October 8, 2020. URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/kamala-harris-im-speaking-mike-pence-debate-1537354>

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "The 17 Goals" *un.org* URL: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> Accessed April 2021.

⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "Goals: 5" *un.org* URL: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5> Accessed April 2021.

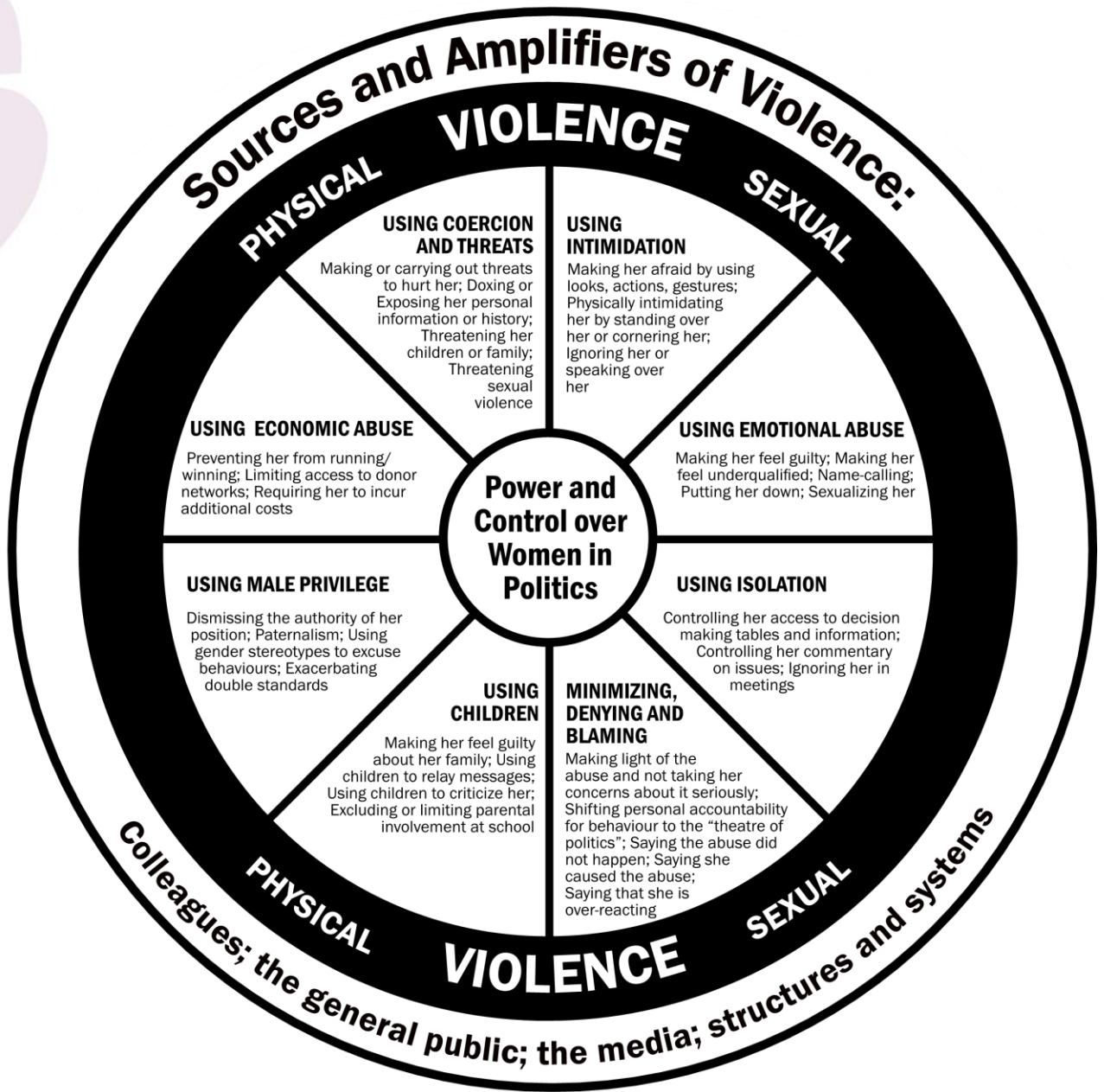


violent tactics used to attempt to “lock up” their voices is essential in changing behaviours to ensure women’s full participation in all aspects of public life and maintain the momentum of current campaigns encouraging equality. From commentary on women’s physical appearance through to direct threats of harm, the normalization and actualization of violence against women in public office must end. The following recommendations are offered for consideration by organizations with the resources, capacity, and knowledge to take action:

1. Complete a study and Power and Control Wheel for Indigenous women in Politics, to ensure appropriate representations of diverse Indigenous governments and to support Indigenous ownership, control, access and possession of collected data;
2. Complete a study and Power and Control Wheel for women engaged in social advocacy and other politicized spaces;
3. ACWS complete an Equity and Accountability Wheel for women in politics in collaboration with electoral parity and women’s organizations;
4. Develop and promote toolkits to support and sustain safe spaces for women in politics and work with local and provincial organizations to ensure wide distribution and application;
5. Develop and deliver campaign schools for political candidates of all genders focused on anti-violent rhetoric and fostering constructive discourse; and
6. Work with governments of all levels to advance policies that foster equality and non-violence in the public and private spheres.
7. Advocate to establish campaign monitoring mechanism with consequences in the form of fines and/or expulsion

By fostering a safe and inclusive political space, a culture of equality is modeled that can have ripple effects throughout society. When women are treated as equal in public contexts, attitudes of equality are more likely to be normalized and present in private contexts.

While our research is informed by the Canadian, and more specifically Albertan, experience, we hope our findings inform the further study of women’s experiences and inspire interventions to lead to equality in all elected offices.



Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (2021)
 ᐱᓄᓐᓴᓐᓴᓐᓴᓐᓴᓐᓴᓐ (Amiskwaciwâskahikan), Treaty 6 Territory
 600 - 10310 Jasper Avenue NW
 Edmonton, AB T5J 2W4
 Canada
 www.acws.ca

Adaptation of the original Power and Control Wheel approved by The Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs
 TheDuluthModel.org