Tim Phillips [00:00:00]:

Today on VoxTalks Economics, when female politicians are attacked, is the violence policy or personal? Welcome to VoxTalks Economics from the Center for Economic Policy Research. My name is Tim Phillips. Each week we bring you the best new research in economics. So remember, subscribe and follow us on Instagram. Men still dominate politics in today's polarized atmosphere, violent attacks on politicians are not unusual as well. Are women more often the targets of these attacks, and are they victimized because of the policies they support or because of their gender? Gianmarco Daniele of the University of Milan is one of a team of researchers who have investigated violence against women in Italian politics, and he joins me now. Gianmarco, welcome to VoxTalks Economics.

Gianmarco Daniele [00:01:03]:

Hello, Tim. Thanks for inviting me.

Tim Phillips [00:01:05]:

There are more women in political office these days, but I imagine that there is still a large gender imbalance. How big is it globally?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:01:13]:

So things have improved. There are definitely more women in politics if we take an historical perspective over the last few decades. But the situation is still largely unbalanced, especially when we get to the top. So when we look, for instance, in parliaments, we see about 25% of women in parliaments around the world. When we look at head of state, it's slightly more than 5%, 5/6%. So there is still a very large inequality upon this dimension. And there is also an inequality in terms of the type of portfolio, the type of policy they are in charge. For instance, a female ministry is three times more likely to be in charge of the family portfolio rather than the economy finance portfolio.

Tim Phillips [00:01:59]:

Women, of course, are discriminated across many dimensions, but this is very large. What are the possible reasons for this?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:02:08]:

Overall, the reason is related to cultural norms across the world. Then in practice, they can take place at defense level. There can be a lack of self selection of women into politics because of cultural norms or expectations toward their family, familial expectation, gender roles, and so on. So this is the first stage. Second stage is political parties. They might be less likely to select a

female candidate, or as I was mentioning before, to appoint them in places of high responsibility. So even without looking at the quantity in a way you can look at the type of political offices they get, you would still see these huge imbalances. And finally, also voters might discriminate and be less likely to pick a female candidate.

Tim Phillips [00:02:54]:

We're focusing on Italian politics today. Is that more or less gender biased than the average, than what we might expect?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:03:04]:

I would say it's not so different from other Western European countries. It depends on the comparison group in terms of women in parliament. Italy does better than Germany, but worse than Spain and generally better than Eastern European countries. Now, indeed, we have a female prime minister in Italy for the first time, which is certainly remarkable. And also the head of the main opposition party, or the 'Partito Democratico' is actually a woman. So this is unprecedented in Italy. In terms of the parliament, about 30% of deputies are women in the Italian parliament. And this is similar when we go at the local level, in municipality and city council, about 30% are women, but when we look at mayors, it's only 15%. And this is again, interesting because at the local levels, the mayor is the main figure.

Tim Phillips [00:03:56]:

And I think in Italy, mayors have some power as well, don't they?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:03:59]:

Exactly. They are directly elected and they are directly in charge of local politics and local spending, public procurement. So yeah, they are very visible figure in local politics.

Tim Phillips [00:04:11]:

We're talking about violence against politicians in this context. How do we define violence?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:04:18]:

It's a kind of an empirical definition in a way, because we collect data from an NGO that closely works with the local politicians and they collect all sort of attacks. In most of the cases, those are physical attacks, threats or arson. Arson in terms, they burn the car of the mayor or certain municipality. So those are attacks concerning local politicians, the politicians that are more likely to be in touch with the people, with the direct contact. So this is not just someone on Facebook writing an insult to a politician, but those are things that happens most of the time in

public spaces.

Tim Phillips [00:04:58]:

And do we know in general that the threat of violence is something that also discourages women from becoming involved in politics?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:05:07]:

This is what we study in this paper. Among other things, we study whether women, female politicians are more attacked. And then which are the reasons and which are the consequences? And the consequences are that indeed, yes, female politician, female mayors that are attacked are less likely to rerun for office. Again, this is concerning because the female mayors are already low percentage, about 15%. So this might decrease even more the share of women that run for office and specifically rerun for office. Indeed, this effect is not limited to the municipality, but it also takes place in a nearby municipality. So there is a sort of scaring effect. Just to clarify something important, we talk about 300, 400 attacks per year. So it's about one attack per day. So it's not a marginal phenomenon. It's something that happens on daily basis.

Tim Phillips [00:06:02]:

And this is something very serious that happens on a daily basis. What do we know and what don't we know about what's causing these attacks, what's behind these attacks?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:06:13]:

What we find that it's not the first thing we thought about when we were studying this paper. So at the beginning we thought, okay, they are going to implement different policies, because we know from the literature that sometimes female politician implement different policies. But this is not what's going on in our context. We also don't find that a female mayors are differently corrupt than their male counterparts. And this is also interesting because we are able to compare female and male candidates mayors that are very similar along all other characteristics. So they are the same age, same level of education, same political ideology and so on. So we are really isolating this dimension of gender. So what we find is that female mayors are attacked more in a context in which they are surrounded by more female politicians. So if we have a female mayor with a city council with a high share of women, then we see more attacks, or if we have a female mayor and also a female president in the region, or a female mayor, and a very fast grow in the share of female politicians in the city council. So our interpretation is that it's not a backlash in places in which we don't see women in politics. It's kind of the opposite. It's a backlash in places in which women are very visible in politics, in which they are really undertaking important steps in representation. And it's there. In this situation, we see this backlash. And if you wanted something similar to what happens sometimes with migrants, it's

not at the beginning the problems, but there is a backlash when there is a certain high share of migrants in a certain area.

[Voiceover] [00:07:57]:

Sadly, this isn't the first time we have covered the problem of gender based violence. In September 2022, we spoke to Abi Adams-Prassl about how the consequences of assaults at work are far less serious for perpetrators if the victim is a woman. Listen to the episode Violence against Women at Work.

Tim Phillips [00:08:20]:

So tell me a little bit about how you did the research, this data that you have on female politicians. How detailed is it and is it self reported data or is it police data?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:08:33]:

So those data is generally self reported. And this might be a concern because you might think women, men are different attitudes towards reporting. So it might be that women are more likely to report, for instance, and this is driving our finding. So a way to control for this is to look at attacks that take place in public spaces, because those attacks cannot be not reported, because if it happens in a public place, there will be people there and so on. So this is not going to be unnoticed. And our results are very similar when we focus only on attacks that take place in public spaces or that are not reported by the victim, because in many cases the attacks is reported by someone else or by the police. In the case, there is arson, for instance. Also, what we know about the attack, so we know the victim, we know the place, the date and a brief description about the attacks. And this give us this additional information, the context that help us to understand exactly what's going on in that specific situation. And this is possible thanks to the great work of this NGO, Avviso Publico, that for 15 years has been working on these topics. And it's an NGO and networks of municipality, so it's really in touch with the local politician. And that's also why they are able to gather all this data, because something interesting is that there are so many of those attacks, but we don't see them on the news because they usually involve local politicians and so they stay at the local level. And it's rare that such a news make, they reach national news, they reach the national coverage, and this is also an explanation for why they go unnoticed. And there isn't such a public debate on this important thing.

Tim Phillips [00:10:14]:

And also the context here. Are we looking around election campaigns, a sort of time when people's emotions really run high, or are we looking across all of the time, just day to day politics?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:10:29]:

So the effects are stronger in the first two years of their mandate. So Italian mayor can be elected for two electoral terms, so they can stay in power ten years. And those attacks differentially for women are in the first two years. So at the beginning of their political tenure, which is interesting, because it tell us that this backlash seems to be temporary. There can be many interpretation of what's going on, but this is something interesting to see. On the other hand, however, we still see attacks towards female mayors in municipality, where there was in the past already a female mayor. So it's not clear, in other words, whether in the future we are still going to see this or whether this attitude is going to change. And something I want to highlight here is that when we think about violence against women at work or at home, we think about many perpetrators. We look at households, many households. We look at firms, many firms. In this context, it's sufficient to have one man to lead to this outcome. It's not necessarily that there is a community that is against the female mayor. In this case, it's enough to have one man against the higher representation of women in politics to lead to this outcome. This is in line with the fact that we see this in places where there are more women in politics where gender norms are generally better, not worse.

Tim Phillips [00:12:01]:

How much more likely are women than men in the same political jobs in Italy to be attacked?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:12:09]:

So when we compare close election in which the election of a female mayor is kind of random. Female mayors with male mayors with similar characteristics, female mayors are about three times more likely to be attacked.

Tim Phillips [00:12:28]:

Three times more likely.

Gianmarco Daniele [00:12:29]:

Almost three times, yeah. So it's a big effect.

Tim Phillips [00:12:31]:

It's extraordinary.

Gianmarco Daniele [00:12:32]:

Yes.

Tim Phillips [00:12:38]:

You've mentioned before that there seems to be no policy difference because we often think about, well, it's an argument in favor of female politicians that they might make different policy choices, and that's a positive argument that we make. But when you analyze this, it's not policy based, we're sure of that?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:12:56]:

Our goal was to compare extremely similar candidates except for their gender. And once we do this, we don't find statistically significant differences in their policy making. So we look at how they spend the municipal budget, how much revenue they get, how they allocate the municipal budget. We also look at corruption. And also there we don't find differences. We look at corruption, crime, we look at public procurements, and we even look at those outcomes in the first year of their electoral term because it could be that they get attacked at the beginning so they change their policy making. Also, this doesn't seem to be the case in our context.

Tim Phillips [00:13:34]:

So we're left with one explanation, aren't we? This is gender based violence, misogyny.

Gianmarco Daniele [00:13:41]:

Yeah, but this is what comes up from our findings. When exposure to female politician is higher, attacks toward female politician are more likely. This seems to be the main explanation. Of course, we cannot exclude that there are other things going on. There can be other explanations, but according to us, this is the main one. I want to mention another one that might play a role. And it's that we see that conditional of being attacked, female mayors are less likely to stay in politics. So when a male mayor is attacked, it doesn't seem to affect so much the probability that this guy stays in politics. But for female mayors, this is not the case. So they are less likely to rerun. So if the attacker is somehow aware or expects such a reaction, they might more likely to attack women because they might expect this different reaction. So they might know that it could be more effective, the attack in terms of driving them out of the political arena.

Tim Phillips [00:14:47]:

Can we conclude that this is going to perpetuate this gender gap in Italian politics?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:14:55]:

Yes, I think it might be definitely. Those are our results. What we don't know, it's about the future, whether this is going to change with the fact that there will be hopefully over time, more and more women in politics. So I think this is an open question about what will happen in the

future and something for policymakers that it's certainly important to monitor the electoral period, both before the election and especially after the election. In the first year after the election, when there is a new local government, I think local authorities should be very careful in monitoring what's going on and assuring that the new mayor can be able to do her work in safety.

Tim Phillips [00:15:36]:

As you say, there is now a female prime minister, there's now a female leader of the opposition. Do you think that this is going to make this kind of gender based violence more common or will it be rarer as a result?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:15:51]:

I don't really know. I think that there are two way of thinking. The first is that it's good to have a female head of state for representation, and I tend to agree with this, actually. And the other is that as she typically doesn't represent feminist ideas in her cabinet, indeed there are a few women. She's not empowering women because she doesn't really have a poor women agenda. But I think both argument have valid points here. For instance, the fact of having a female prime minister is true that she's implementing a very poor women policies. But the voters, the female voters of her party, I think they might be empowered by seeing that someone similar to them in terms of ideas, identity reached that level. So I'm not so pessimistic upon this point of view. I don't really know which of the two effects is more important, but I think they might both be relevant.

Tim Phillips [00:16:50]:

Is there anything that policy can do to change this situation?

Gianmarco Daniele [00:16:56]:

I think upon a purely law enforcement point of view, as I was mentioning, the first months of a new local government are crucial because a lot of new decisions are taken and you have this new political player, a new mayor, in many cases, the first time in which you have a female mayor. And this is a crucial period. So the police, the justice system, they should monitor, they should really help the new mayor to be able to fulfill her job. So this is a thing upon policy making, what can be done? Because our results show that this is a problem, especially at the beginning of the first electoral term. So we can identify a pretty specific period. And we believe focusing energy, also media attention, I think would be helpful because, of course, if we don't talk about this, nobody cares.

Tim Phillips [00:17:46]:

Let's hope that many more people do talk about it. And your research helps that you've uncovered some fascinating but very disturbing evidence here. Gianmarco, thank you for talking about it today.

Gianmarco Daniele [00:17:59]:

Thank you.

Tim Phillips [00:18:07]:

The paper is called Attacking Women or their Policies: Understanding Violence Against Women in Politics, and the authors are Gianmarco Daniele, Gemma Dipoppa and Massimo Pulejo. It is discussion paper 18333 at CEPR.

[Voiceover] [00:18:31]:

This has been a VoxTalk from the Center for Economic Policy Research. If you enjoyed this episode, remember to subscribe. You can find us wherever you get your podcasts. Next week on VoxTalks Economics, what the repeal of prohibition tells us about alcohol's role in later life mortality.