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Online abuse could drive women out of politics

Women politicians are faced with almost constant online threats and abuse, posing a real threat to the health of our democracies

It is becoming increasingly evident that life in modern politics is presenting women with a stark choice — endure almost constant online threats and abuse or get out of public life.

Jacinda Ardern, the former prime minister of New Zealand, and Sanna Marin, the former prime minister of Finland, are the two highest profile cases, but the problem is widespread. Elected representatives have always faced criticism and public scrutiny. Some would argue this is par for the course. But the social media era has normalised ever more aggressive forms of abuse. Politicians can now expect insults, intimidation, cyberbullying and trolling as a regular part of their daily online interactions.

A widespread problem

Women in politics can expect even worse. Everything from sexist comments to hate speech, cyberstalking, body shaming and even threats of assault, rape and death, all create a toxic virtual environment that poses a real risk to their participation in public life – and the health of democracy.

The problem is global. Research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, an organisation that seeks to represent parliaments around the world, revealed that four out of five women parliamentarians have been subjected to psychological violence such as bullying, intimidation, verbal abuse or harassment. Two thirds have been targeted with humiliating sexual or sexist remarks, and more than two out of five have received threats of assault, sexual violence or death.

The abuse against Ardern has been so intense that even in retirement,

she's expected to have extra police protection. Work in the US and Canada, India, the UK, South East Asia, across Africa and in Europe reveal broadly similar findings there.

This abuse isn't just a collection of isolated incidents — it's a systemic problem that erodes our democratic values.

Ongoing research at the University of Galway on the experiences of female politicians in Ireland – from local councillors to former government ministers – paints a similarly worrying picture. In qualitative interviews, conducted as part of my ongoing research with colleagues, we've found more than nine out of ten reported they had received abusive messages.

These ranged from foul language to hateful comments about their appearance and intelligence. Almost three quarters said they had experienced threats of physical violence on social media, and 38 per cent said they had received threats of rape or sexual violence – all criminal offences under Irish law.

Joan Burton, the former *tánaiste* (deputy prime minister) of Ireland, previously revealed she had been threatened with an acid attack and had received death threats from internet trolls. Intersectional cyber abuse is also commonplace. Women politicians who belong to minority racial or ethnic backgrounds, or identify as LGBTQI+, are frequent targets.

And, of course, it is not just politicians who are at risk. The Economist Intelligence Unit has reported that more than one in three women have experienced online violence.

Driving women out

All this has the very real potential to pose a chilling effect on the participation and engagement of women in civic and political life — not just as politicians but as participants in the online debates that now drive so much of political culture. A global survey by Washington-based non-profit National Democratic Institute found that more than half of young women who posted political opinions online were attacked for their views.

This abuse isn't just a collection of isolated incidents — it's a systemic problem that erodes our democratic values. One in five Irish female politicians who responded to our study said they have considered quitting politics because of the online harassment they have received. Safety concerns for themselves, their staff and their families further deter participation. Some respondents also said they didn't feel safe going to

public meetings.

The examples highlighted don't merely revolve around hatred towards women. They underscore that those seeking to oppose a government understand this form of hatred is an effective means to achieve their goals.

A 2021 report by NATO tracked abuse received by Finnish female government ministers, including Marin, on X (formerly Twitter) and found volumes of hostile, gendered attacks. The report uncovered routine uses of terms like 'lipstick government', 'feminist quintet' and 'tampax team' to refer to the government.

A key point in the report is that these attacks were coordinated by those actively seeking to disrupt democracy. This amounts to compelling evidence that the problem runs deep, illustrating that people attempting to undermine a government have recognised attacking women as a winning strategy.

The examples highlighted don't merely revolve around hatred towards these women. They underscore that those seeking to oppose a government understand this form of hatred is an effective means to achieve their goals. This suggests a disconcerting indifference on the part of the attackers but also a perception that nothing can or will be done to counter their attacks.

After years of progress on increasing female participation in political life, democracies around the world are now in real danger of regressing if women are driven out of politics.

Addressing the problem

Tackling cyber-violence against women in politics is complicated but that doesn't mean we cannot take action. Laws already exist that are supposed to protect women from this kind of abuse but they are not being vigorously enforced.

It's also time to rein in the tech platforms and hold them legally accountable for the toxic content they host, pushed out by their algorithms. A collective international effort is needed to advocate for tough sanctions.

Robust support systems are

That should include, for example, an online

needed for women politicians facing abuse.

safety tsar with the power to force these monoliths to take down abusive content and stop it from spreading. Tech companies that are consistent hate spreaders should face massive fines.

Public awareness and education campaigns should target boys and men, emphasising respectful online behaviour and critical thinking to encourage them to question harmful stereotypes and biases. They should be taught digital literacy to better understand the consequences of their actions online. Meanwhile, robust support systems are needed for women politicians facing abuse.

The impact of online abuse on female politicians is significant. And if the issue isn't addressed, it could lead to dire consequences for democracy as women retreat from positions of power.

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