

Backbench Business Debate: Online Abuse of Elected Women Representatives

Tuesday 20 April 9.25am

Centenary Action Group Briefing

Centenary Action Group is a cross-party coalition of organisations and activists campaigning to remove the barriers to women's representation in politics, including the threat or experience of violence, abuse and harassment.

Current Context

- Only 34% of MPs and just 35% of local councillors in England and Wales are women. We need more women in all our diversity at every level of politics. Diversity drives more effective and inclusive policymaking, allowing governments to better represent the populations they serve¹. Research indicates that parliaments are more likely to substantively tackle key issues such as childcare, violence against women and maternal mortality, when an increased number of female legislators are elected². As the impacts of COVID-19 continue, diverse representation is even more important in ensuring that existing inequalities are not further compounded by gaps in representation at a local and national level.
- Abuse and intimidation are commonly experienced by women politicians and electoral candidates. We are concerned about the increased online abuse and harassment that female candidates will almost certainly face in the May 2021 elections.
- In 2016, a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union of 39 countries found that 82 per cent of the women politicians surveyed had experienced some form of psychological violence; 44 per cent had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction; and 65 per cent had been subjected to sexist remarks.
- Women politicians who are Black, Asian or from a Minority Ethnic background face an increased risk of abuse on the basis of their race as well as gender. An analysis of tweets by Amnesty International found that in the six weeks prior to the 2017 UK General Election, women MPs in Westminster from these backgrounds received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs, with Diane Abbott receiving 45.14% of all abusive tweets sent in the run up to the election.
- At the 2019 General Election, several women MPs stood down, citing the continued abuse they received online as one of their key reasons.
- The use of digital spaces has increased significantly in light of COVID-19, and with it has come reports of an increase in abuse and harassment online. Glitch and End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition's recent nation-wide survey showed that 41.5% of 480 respondents had faced online abuse since the beginning of the pandemic. This proportion increased to 50% for women of colour.
- Online abuse is a threat to democracy and equal participation. In the past year, Equal Power data reveals there has been a big increase in the number of women saying they are unlikely to put themselves forward for an election. Back in December 2019, 59% of women surveyed said

¹ Centenary Action Group (2020). "Data Drives Diversity: A Simple Step to More Transparent Politics", Centenary Action Group https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6c6785a30f513e35cda046/t/5f71fcc6f2eb6a05700e4e01/1601305800688/data_drives_diversity_A4_report_OCTOBER_PAGES.pdf

² Westminster Foundation for Democracy (2020) "Women Political Leaders Key to More Equal and Caring Societies" <https://www.wfd.org/2020/07/29/women-political-leaders-key-to-more-equal-and-caring-societies-new-report-shows/>

they were 'unlikely to stand as an MP' and 44% 'unlikely to stand as a councilor' if there was an election within the year. Now nearly a year on from the start of coronavirus, this has risen to 74% 'unlikely to stand as an MP' and 62% 'unlikely to stand as a councillor'.

- Today, 69% of the women surveyed (440 Equal Power participants) said abuse or harassment from the public or other parties was a barrier to pursuing a political career and seeking election.

Recommendations

1) Centre gender-based violence in the Online Harms Bill

The Online Harms Bill is a pivotal opportunity to tackle online abuse against women and girls, including elected representatives. However, there is concern amongst civil society organisations that the white paper [falls short](#) when addressing the disproportionate levels of online harms faced by women and those with multiple protected characteristics.

The Online Harms Bill must include gender-based abuse as a priority harm and recognise the compounding harm experienced by those with multiple protected characteristics, rather than categorisation as separate issues.

2) Ring-fence 10% of the Tech Tax to tackle online abuse

According to the [Office for National Statistics](#), the new Digital Services Tax of 2% on tech giants like Facebook, Google and Twitter raised £29 million in the first month of operation alone. The 'polluter pays' principle suggests that the companies enabling these harms should pay to help rectify the damage. By ring-fencing at least 10% of this new tax annually for ending online abuse against women and girls, the Government can commit at least £3.5 million to further establishing online standards which are fair and necessary to the growing digital economy.

To efficiently and effectively combat online abuse and violence against women and girls, we recommend this 10% should be pledged to enforce existing legislation on online abuse and increase police resources; educate the public on the importance of good online citizenship; and empower civil society organisations working to end online abuse.

3) Sanctions for intimidation of election candidates

The Government must promptly bring forward legislation to introduce a new electoral sanction of intimidation. Under this additional electoral sanction, someone convicted of intimidating a candidate, prospective candidate, campaigner or elected representative would receive a fine or prison sentence, in addition to a ban from standing for elected office for five years. The Minister committed to bringing forward this legislation in 2018 but no timetable has been set.

4) Training to women elected representatives and their staff

Online abuse must be treated as a workplace harassment hazard by House Authorities, who should facilitate training and support to female MPs and their staff so they can feel safer, more prepared and better protect themselves online.

Resources

- [Equal Power](#) provides free online training and support to get more women into every level of politics. The programme, which 3,000 women have signed up to, is led by Fawcett Society, Centenary Action Group, Citizens UK, 50:50 Parliament, Glitch UK, Muslim Women's Network UK and The Parliament Project.
- Glitch is a UK based, internationally recognised, charity working to end online abuse women and marginalised communities. Glitch's brand new toolkit for women in public life, [Dealing with Digital Threats to Democracy](#) is designed to help women in politics understand how to practise digital self-defence; become an online active bystander; and be able to run positive public campaigns online.