

Briefing: End harassment and abuse for women in politics

Centenary Action 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:

- Women are 51% of the population but only [35% of MPs](#) and only [36% of local councillors](#) across the UK 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 serve. [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 elected.
- [Centenary Action](#) has identified 'The violence, harassment and abuse that politically active women face on and offline' as one of the major barriers to women's political participation.
- [The Jo Cox Foundation](#) sees the abuse and intimidation of elected representatives as one of the biggest threats to our democracy in the UK.
- Abuse and intimidation are commonly experienced by women politicians and electoral candidates and there is growing concern about the level of toxicity in political discourse.
- With potentially both local elections and a general election this year the need to tackle this issue is urgent.
- A recent report by the Fawcett Society, [A House for Everyone: A Case for Modernising Parliament](#), reveals that:
 - 93% of women MPs said that online abuse or harassment has a negative impact on how they feel about being an MP
 - 73% of women MPs said they 'do not use social media to speak on certain issues because of the abusive environment online', compared to 51% of men
- Glitch's recent report ['The Digital Misogynoir Report: Ending the dehumanising of Black women on social media'](#) focuses on the ways Black women are uniquely discriminated against because of their gender and race online. Through analysis of social media posts across a variety of platforms they found misogynoir and misogyny more generally were prevalent across all the social media platforms studied.
- [Amnesty International](#) found that BAME women MPs received 41% of abusive tweets, despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study.
- Abuse does not only occur online, some politicians have experienced destruction to property, assault, stalking and sexual harassment.
- The 'A House for Everyone' report highlighted that the culture in parliament can be exclusionary and that it is still very much 'a male place'. Interviewees spoke about the treatment of women in the Chamber and their experiences of inappropriate or sexist behaviour.
 - "there's nothing off limits in terms of using it as a weapon to attack your opponent ...and for some people that will mean using racist, sexist, homophobic insults... using people's disabilities against them..." (Woman interviewee)
 - Only 37% of women MPs agreed that 'the culture in Parliament is inclusive for people like me', compared to a majority of men (55%)
 - 69% of women MPs and 49% of all MPs have witnessed sexist behaviour in Parliament in the last five years

Recommendations

Establish a central unit to address abuse and intimidation of elected politicians

- Government to implement and resource a central unit to coordinate existing initiatives, resource new solutions, and facilitate information sharing between agencies. It would measure and analyse the problem and report on actions taken.

Promote Civil Discourse

- Politicians and candidates should commit to engaging in civil discourse and avoiding toxic and discriminatory language. This should include zero-tolerance for misogynistic (and racialised misogynistic language)
- Support the recommendations made by the [Jo Cox Civility Commission](#).

Tackle online abuse of women elected representatives

- Commit to addressing online violence against women and girls through legislation and other mechanisms, integrating an intersectional approach. Solutions should focus on prevention and safety by design and be future-proofed to tackle emerging harms.
- Implementation of the Online Safety Act must include strong consideration of violence against women and girls and the abuse and intimidation of elected politicians. The regulator Ofcom must actively seek the advice of civil society organisations with expertise in this area, and ensure regular, specific training.
- A public health approach to ending online gender based violence, with increased media literacy and enhanced digital citizenship across the UK

Improve the culture and practices in parliament

- Create a new body to drive diversity and inclusivity reforms in the House of Commons. This body should review recommendations made to date and lead and progress the gender sensitive parliament agenda including regular future audits.
- Create an independent Ethics Commission charged with overseeing standards, conduct, and culture in parliament.
- Work with political parties to review and institutionalise the professional and pastoral support currently offered to MPs including, expanding the offer to focus on induction, ongoing professional development training and mental health and wellbeing support.
- Ensure MPs receive training covering Sexism and Sexual Harassment.

Political parties to improve policies and processes

- Review internal party sexual harassment and complaints policies to ensure they are transparent, quick, victim-focused and independent, and cover volunteers, employees and elected and appointed representatives. Any processes and policies implemented should be subject to ongoing review to ensure they are effective and fit for purpose.
- This should be combined with training and action to create culture change to prevent sexual harassment.
- Mandatory civility and equalities training should be implemented for all candidates.
- Political parties must consistently enforce their existing codes of conduct, with relevant sanctions when the code is not adhered to.