DIGITAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN LEADERS: ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Digital harassment of women leaders is now a disturbingly normal experience for women parliamentarians and politicians, journalists, academics, feminist commentators and activists around the world. Online rape and death threats are commonplace, as are vulgar, graphic, sexual and objectifying comments, threats and insults. These experiences reflect existing patterns of violence and discrimination against women and girls, both in the political sphere and more broadly: women are more likely to experience severe forms of online harassment and abuse than men, including cyberstalking and death threats. These acts not only cause significant psychological, emotional and even physical harm, spilling over into real-world acts of abuse, violence or self-harm, but collectively work to constrain women's voice and agency in public spaces and undermine democratic culture and practices. There are few existing initiatives to systematically address digital harassment of women leaders.

This factsheet is a summary of a longer report, VAWG Helpdesk Research Report 210.

STATE OF THE EVIDENCE

Overall, there is **very little high-quality research available directly assessing the scope and range of digital harassment against women leaders**.[i] The findings and recommendations presented here should be read in light of this limited evidence, as well as potential limitations to the rapid review methodology used for the longer report, of which this factsheet is a summary. This involved a desk-based search to identify publicly available sources. Based on the evidence identified, areas that would benefit from further research include:

- **Effectiveness of interventions that address digital harassment of women leaders** – there is currently no literature available assessing this.
- **Effectiveness of interventions to address the broader harassment of women and girls** – some literature outlines the interventions themselves, but there is limited literature that critiques or assesses the effectiveness of these interventions.
- **Systematic assessment of the proportion of women leaders affected by digital harassment** – particularly in non-Anglophone contexts.
- **The particular scope and impacts of digital harassment against women leaders from minority and marginalised communities** – including women with disabilities, women from the poorest communities in their society, from minority ethnic and religious backgrounds and marginalised geographical regions, and women who identify as LGBTQ or transgender.

SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

While systematic evidence is limited, research from the UK, USA, Chile and South Africa suggests that **senior female politicians are more than three times as likely to experience derogatory comments related to their gender** on Twitter as compared to their male counterparts. These leaders also experience significantly more online insults and offensive comments than men overall, in some contexts up to twice as many.[1] In terms of broader patterns of violence against women in politics, one survey of 55 female MPs from 37 countries found that **82% of women MPs experienced psychological violence during their parliamentary term**, primarily in the form of threats of rape, murder, beatings or abduction. A shocking 22% reported having been subjected to at least one act of sexual violence. This study also found that social media is now the primary channel through which psychological violence is perpetrated against women MPs.[2]

Women commentators, journalists and activists are much more likely to be trolled or abused online compared to men. An analysis by the Guardian of 70 million online comments over a ten-year period found that although most regular opinion writers are white males, the 10 regular writers receiving most abuse were eight women (four white, four non-white) and two black men. Women writing for male-dominated sections (Sport and Technology), or discussing feminism or rape, received the most abuse.[3] In terms of broader violence against women online, 23% of women across the EU have reported experiencing online abuse in their lifetime,[4] and 60-70% of cyberstalking victims worldwide are estimated to be women.[5]

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

Women who are black, Asian or minority ethnic, from minority religious groups or non-heterosexual are more likely to experience digital harassment – often in the form of explicit attacks based on their race, religion or sexual orientation. Scottish Parliamentarian and Opposition Leader **Ruth Davidson** recently told Amnesty International that the online abuse she faces is both misogynistic and homophobic.[10] Similarly, in the run up to the 2017 UK General Election, **Diane Abbott**, Shadow Home Secretary and the first black female MP in the UK, received almost half (45%) of all abuse against women MPs active on Twitter.[10]

i. The rapid review only included a light-touch assessment of the quality of the evidence and therefore there are limitations to the conclusions about evidence quality.

FORMS OF HARASSMENT

Patterns and forms of digital harassment against women leaders are similar across both developed and developing contexts, according to existing evidence. Common experiences include:

- **Death and rape threats –** A common feature in many well-known cases, particularly leaders known for feminist activism or commentary on women's rights, including: Anita Sarkeesian (North American blogger and gamer); Stella Creasy (British MP for Walthamstow); and Caroline Criado-Perez (British feminist activist who campaigned for Jane Austen's image to be added to the new British £10 note).[6]
- **Gender-based derogatory comments or insults –** A universal experience for female politicians worldwide. Notable examples discussed in literature include Hillary Clinton,[1] Michelle Bachelet and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma.[2]
- **'Forced' / 'revenge pornography'** – Publishing images or videos of a sexual nature online without the person's consent. Common feature of wider online sexual harassment, particularly for younger women.[7]
- **Cyberstalking –** Often involving threats to track down the victim in their home or workplace, and can spill-over into real-life stalking.[8]
- **'Doxxing' –** Identity theft followed by releasing a victim's personal details or information online, such as home/work address, contact details or financial information.[7]
- **Trolling** – Excessive, relentless negative, offensive or abusive comments, often of gender-based nature.[9]

IMPACT ON WOMEN LEADERS

There is a lack of systematic evidence analysing the impacts of online harassment against women leaders. Existing research suggests that the impacts are like those experienced in real-life, and can include:

- **Withdrawal of women from politics** – Research from Australia found that 60% of women aged 18 – 21 and 80% of women over 31 said they were less likely to run for political office after seeing how negatively former Prime Minister Julia Gillard was treated by the media. Women with additional vulnerabilities, like disability, poverty or geographical distance, are likely to be especially discouraged from entering politics.[11]
- **Withdrawal of women from online dialogue** – In a study from India, 28% of women who had suffered ICT-based violence intentionally reduced their presence online.[4] Other common coping strategies include "self-censoring", using pseudonyms or switching to anonymous commenting.[4, 9]
- **Emotional and psychological distress** – Ranging from feelings of irritation, anxiety, sadness, loneliness and vulnerability to pain, shock, fear, terror and violation, mirroring real-life responses to harassment and abuse.[12] The scale and repeated occurrence of digital harassment, combined with the anonymity of perpetrators, are thought to make it especially damaging for victims.[4]

Other harms include **economic harms**, for example if an explicit image of a victim appears in search engine results, making it difficult for them to seek or find employment; **reduced access to technology** as women seek to avoid further harassment; and **limitations to women's digital or actual mobility.**[4, 7]

Research from India found that online abuse leads many women to withdraw from digital spaces. As quoted in UN Human Rights Council (2018).[4]

36% of respondents who had experienced harassment online took no action at all.

28% reported that they had intentionally reduced their online presence after suffering online abuse.

> *"I'm at home, with the doors locked, terrified ... I have cancelled all speaking engagements. I am afraid to leave my yard, I will never feel the same. I will never be the same"*
>
> Tech blogger Kathy Sierra speaking in the wake of online death threats and graphic sexual harassment. As quoted in Jane (2014).[12]

INTERVENTIONS

Interventions to address digital harassment include targeted programming for women political leaders, technical solutions and action by digital service providers, legal measures and innovative technology platforms. Many of these interventions, or solutions, focus on preventing or addressing online harassment and abuse generally, or online violence against women, but not specifically women leaders. **At present there is no rigorous evidence on the effectiveness of interventions**. Relevant interventions include:

Targeted guidance for women leaders and activists, including programming and monitoring guidance:

- National Democratic Institute (NDI) 2018 safety planning tool to safeguard women in politics, "**Think10**". Think10 builds on NDI's #NotTheCost programme and monitoring guidance (see box).[11]
- UNDP and UN Women 2015 programming guide on **Violence Against Women in Elections** makes suggestions of indicators to measure in pre- (# posts of online harassment targeting women) and post-electoral period (# postings with online harassment and bullying against women elected officials).[13]

INTERVENTIONS – CONTINUED

Targeted digital safety education and resources for feminist activists and human rights defenders:

- **Security-in-a-Box** aims to assist human rights defenders with digital security and privacy by providing them with a collection of hands-on guides.[14]
- **A DIY Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity** with links to cybersecurity tools, and hashtag on Twitter (#SafeHubTech) to which users can tweet cybersecurity questions / concerns

Legal / law enforcement measures to prevent, protect against and prosecute online harassment and abuse:

- "**Revenge pornography**" was recently added as an offence under the UK Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015.[8]
- **The UK Crown Prosecution Service** recently (2018) published guidelines on prosecuting harassment cases involving social media.[16]
- The UK Government's **Digital Charter and Internet Safety Green Paper** (2017) prioritises online misogyny as one of the most significant forms of harm online.[17]

Technical solutions and steps being taken by service providers to prevent online harassment and abuse are also relevant, although not targeted at women political leaders specifically. **Facebook's** "real name" policy requires users to provide their actual identity (first and last name), although other platforms like Twitter have not followed suit.[19] Other measures being considered by many social media and email platforms include stricter identity checks; more proactive investigation of reported incidents by service providers; filters to detect abusive language in online communications; and more effective cooperation with law enforcement agencies.[19]

Innovative technology platforms have emerged from the human rights community to monitor and follow-up on harassment and abuse. For example, **Take Back the Tech!** developed a data visualisation mapping tool [Map It!] which plots incidents of technology-based VAW reported from around the world (see image).[20] The stories are used by campaigners to raise awareness and advocate for redress for online VAW at local, national and international levels.
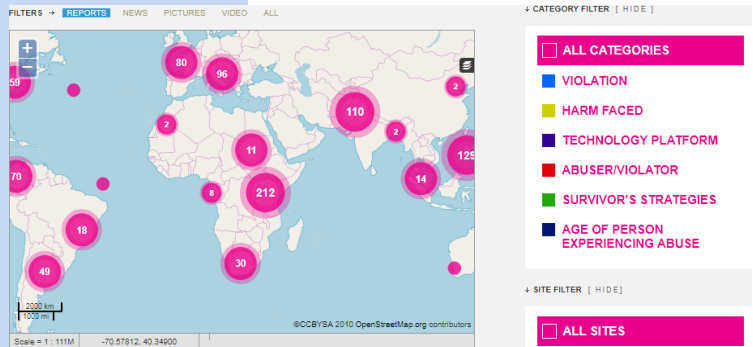
Bring Back the Tech!'s 'Map It!' tool is using innovative online reporting platforms to bring attention to technology-based violence against women worldwide, and advocate for change.

Online campaigns and collective organising against online violence and harassment against women in politics has been significant among users, through hashtags like #NotTheCost, #NameItChangeIt, & #ReclaimTheInternet.[21] These campaigns have led to online cooperation between women and women's groups, and discussions on strategies to prevent technology-related VAW. Another example is the #ByteBack campaign which aims to stop online trolling and abuse of women journalists and commentators in South Asia.[22] It has created guides, videos and online resources to raise awareness, although no evidence of impact is currently available.

FURTHER READING

- VAWG Helpdesk Reports on Digital Harassment of Women Leaders: *Annotated Bibliography* and *A Review of the Evidence* (Reports to be published on 7th November 2018)
- Amnesty International (2018) *Toxic Twitter*, London: Amnesty International
- Ballington, J and Bardall, G (2015) *Violence Against Women in Elections*, New York: UNDP/UNWomen
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2016) *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians,* Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union
- National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2018) *#NotTheCost Programme guidance for stopping violence against women in politics,* Washington DC: NDI.
- UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender (2016) *Combatting Online Violence Against Women & Girls: A Worldwide Wake-Up Call*

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