

Intimidation in Public Life

Written evidence

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13 September 2017

Dear Lord Bew

Committee on Standards in Public Life: Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates Review Roundtable

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to yesterday's roundtable. You are clearly working on something very important and I wish you well with it.

We were asked to add anything to our oral remarks in writing should we need to. I just wanted to provide the numbers on the campaign activities of members of different parties to back up the point I made about left-right differences in intimidation on social media being (at least in part) a function not just of polarisation, of different political cultures and of Conservative incumbency, but also of members' respective access to, and interest in, social media as a campaign tool.

The table below contains data from our survey of party members conducted for us by YouGov a fortnight or so after the 2017 general election campaign.

Which of the following things did you do for the party during the 2015 election campaign?

Activity	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Green	SNP	Total
'Liked' something by party/candidate on FB	38.3 (-1.3)	63.4 (+12.3)	62.4 (+15.0)	35.7 (-8.5)	63.2 (-4.4)	70.7 (-2.0)	57.4 (+4.0)
Tweeted/re-tweeted party/candidate messages	23.1 (-2.9)	38.5 (+1.6)	38.8 (+7.7)	18.8 (-4.1)	39.4 (-6.3)	43.9 (-4.7)	35.1 (-0.1)
Displayed election poster	23.6 (-6.0)	55.8 (+4.6)	49.0 (+11.2)	34.3 (-8.6)	45.1 (-4.2)	67.7 (-8.3)	45.2 (-0.5)
Delivered leaflets	33.6 (-9.9)	31.6 (-10.9)	46.1 (+0.2)	27.9 (-10.4)	24.2 (-4.6)	31.7 (-3.7)	33.8 (-5.6)
Attended public meeting or hustings	21.3 (-10.0)	24.9 (-6.5)	24.1 (-4.1)	30.2 (-10.3)	20.3 (-7.0)	35.6 (-13.4)	26.0 (-8.6)
Canvassed face to face or by phone	23.0 (-13.5)	27.1 (-8.6)	24.3 (-8.3)	16.5 (-9.6)	14.1 (-5.0)	19.4 (-8.8)	22.1 (-8.3)
N 2017	1002 (1193)	1024 (1180)	730 (1082)	785 (437)	845 (665)	963 (1009)	5696 (5219)

Note: All figures are percentages. Figures in parenthesis represent percentage point changes 2015-2017. Source: UK Party Members Project surveys, 2015 and 2017.

You will see that there is a very marked difference between Conservative (and UKIP) grassroots' members use of social media – which is almost certainly partly a function of age: over four-in-ten Tory members are aged over 65, whereas other parties (except UKIP) have a rather more even spread across the age range and therefore have more 'digital natives' and near-natives among their membership.

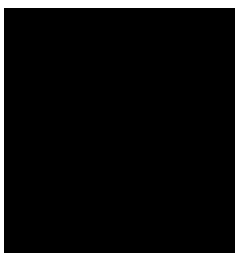
In passing, however, you might note that Tory members are much less likely than some of their counterparts to deliver leaflets or attend meetings or canvass. This suggests we should be careful not to exaggerate any inter-party differences in the extent to which on-the-ground campaigners experience off-line intimidation at the sharp-end of elections. On the other hand, it is interesting that Conservative members are so much more reluctant (or at least enthusiastic) than their counterparts in other parties to nail their colours to the mast via posters.

I also talked about some post 2015 Labour members and how at least some of them were used to a more factional and vituperative politics typical of far-left engagement, as well as being keen to see their party purged of people they dismiss as ‘Blairites’, ‘neo-liberals’, and ‘centrists’. And I spoke about feelings on Israel/Palestine running so high that they sometimes shade – in the party’s internal debate (on and offline) – into antisemitism. For completeness, I attach a report we prepared for the Chakrabarti Commission on the latter.

It may also be worth, in the context of the bitterness of Labour’s internal politics which another contributor spoke about during the session, noting some of the findings from a survey we carried out of post-2015 Labour members in 2016, reported [here in the Huffington Post](#) (and elsewhere). This revealed that three in ten of them had *not* voted Labour at the 2015 election. It also revealed that they were particularly loyal to Jeremy Corbyn and that there was a serious appetite getting rid of MPs those who were not: indeed, over two-thirds of those who joined the party after Mr Corbyn was elected agreed that ‘Labour MPs who persistently and publicly criticise the leadership in the media should be deselected.’

Finally, I also noted that, although the tone of discourse at the grassroots was inevitably influenced by those at the top, we should avoid ‘golden ageism’ when we think about the supposed decline of responsibility in this respect, and I referred to language used by Nye Bevan. His precise remark, in a speech made in Manchester in July 1948 (when, note, he was Minister for Health, not an excitable backbencher), was ‘So far as I am concerned they [the Tories] are lower than vermin....They condemned millions of people to semi-starvation.’ One can only imagine how such remarks would be reported today!

Yours sincerely



Tim Bale
Professor of Politics, Queen Mary University of London

Submission to the Chakrabarti Inquiry on behalf of the ESRC Party Members Project, 3 June 2016

Professor Tim Bale and Dr Monica Poletti: Queen Mary University of London

Professor Paul Webb: University of Sussex

This submission focuses on two issues which we believe are important for the Inquiry to take account of. One is contextual, the other is more specific to the party and its members, and we have original survey research, conducted for [our ESRC-funded party members project](#) by YouGov on both issues.

The contextual issue is the extent to which antisemitism impacts and influences Labour and other voters. The specific issue is the extent to which antisemitism exists among Labour's grassroots members and the extent to which those members regard it as a problem.

Context: antisemitism and UK voters

Understandably, the main focus of the Inquiry is on Labour as a membership organization. However, context is important. What about those who simply support the Party and, indeed, what about the country as a whole? Is there much evidence to suggest that Labour *voters* and Britain in general has a problem with Jews, at least when it comes to politics?

The answer would seem to be no – although things are far from perfect. In fact, less than one in ten voters think that Jews have too much influence in Britain and two-thirds would be happy with a Jewish Prime Minister. But that does, of course, mean that a minority aren't as open minded as they could or should be.

Those figures come from [a survey of 1,694 adults, weighted and representative of all GB adults, carried out for us at the beginning of May by YouGov](#).

More precisely, just seven per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that 'Jews have too much influence in this country', a drop of three percentage points [since 2014](#) when we last asked the same question.

Meanwhile, 65 per cent of voters said that a Jewish Prime Minister would be as acceptable as a member of any other faith – an increase of three percentage points since 2014. In party terms Lib Dem voters are the most likely (81 per cent) to agree with that statement, followed by Labour voters (74 per cent), Tory voters (67 per cent). Only UKIP voters (51 per cent) were noticeably less likely to agree.

The vast majority of respondents, 83 per cent, said that knowing a party leader was Jewish would make no difference to their voting intentions. Just six per cent of voters said it would make them less likely to vote for that party – although this rises to 13 per cent among UKIP voters.

These party differences may have something to do, at least in part, with familiarity. Lib Dem voters are most likely (40 per cent) to say they have Jewish friends,

acquaintances or work colleagues – followed by Labour voters (37 per cent), Tory voters (36 per cent), and UKIP voters (24 per cent).

Perhaps not surprisingly, age and to some extent social class difference make a difference: broadly speaking, younger people and ABC1 voters seem to be more open-minded. But there also seems to be some regional variation in attitudes: Londoners seem a little less likely than voters living elsewhere in the UK to accept the idea of a British Jew becoming Prime Minister.

A majority, 57 per cent, of respondents living in the capital agreed that a Jewish Prime Minister would be as acceptable as a member of any other faith. But that was a lower proportion than elsewhere. Voters in the rest of southern England are the most accepting of the idea (69 per cent), followed by voters in the north (65 per cent), the Midlands and Wales (65 per cent), and Scotland (64 per cent). Some may conclude that the difference may be accounted for by the higher presence of certain ethnic minority communities in London which are hostile to Jews. However, this would be to jump to conclusions: the subsamples are simply not big enough to pronounce on whether this is or isn't the case.

It is also important not to fall into the error of thinking that all of those who do not declare that a Jewish Prime Minister would be acceptable would necessarily regard one as *unacceptable* or, by the same token, that those who do not express their disagreement with the idea that Jews have too much influence in Britain necessarily think that they have. In fact, fairly substantial minorities on both of these questions declare either that they don't know or that they neither agree nor disagree. On the other hand, the fact that, for instance, 35 per cent of people say they neither agree nor disagree that Jews have too much influence will understandably be seen by some as worrying in and of itself.

More generally, there is some evidence that the recent controversy over antisemitism in the Labour Party may have heightened awareness of perceived discrimination. Asked about the level of prejudice against Jews in the UK, 29 per cent of all voters said there is 'a great deal or a fair amount' – an increase of five percentage points since 2014. While nearly one in two (48 per cent) feel that Jews face little or no discrimination, that figure is down six percentage points from when we asked the same question a year ago.

So voters reckon there is discrimination out there, but most of them don't seem themselves to be swayed by prejudice, at least when it comes to politics. There are variations of course, and pockets of intolerance persist among some voters – particularly (but not exclusively) among those inclined to support UKIP – and perhaps (but only perhaps, at least on our figures) among some minority communities. We now turn from context to specifics – from Labour (and other) voters to Labour members (and registered supporters).

Labour grassroots members and antisemitism

YouGov, this time for *The Times*, surveyed 1031 Labour Party members between 9 and 11 May 2016. The two most important questions asked about antisemitism related to how big a problem members saw it as. The answers were as follows:

Thinking about antisemitism in political parties, which of these statements comes closer to your view?

Antisemitism is a bigger problem in the Labour Party than other parties: **5%**
Antisemitism is a problem in Labour but no worse than in other parties: **47%**
Antisemitism is not a problem in Labour but is a problem in other parties: **16%**
Anti-Semitism is not a problem in the Labour party or any other party: **22%**
Don't know: **9%**

Thinking about the stories in the press over the last few weeks about Labour and antisemitism, which of these statements comes closer to your view?

Labour has a problem with antisemitism and it is right that the media report on it: **10%**
Labour has a problem with antisemitism but it is being used by the press and Jeremy Corbyn's opponents to attack him: **35%**
Labour does not have a problem with antisemitism and it has been created by the press and Jeremy Corbyn's opponents to attack him: **49%**
None of these: **3%**
Don't know: **3%**

These figures suggest that the party membership is split, with almost half (45 per cent) acknowledging the Party has an antisemitism problem and half (49 per cent) denying that it's the case. They also suggest that there is an overwhelming majority of members (84 per cent) who, whether they think there is a problem or not, believe that it has been exploited by the media or enemies of the leadership.

Our survey, conducted for us by YouGov slightly later and over a slightly longer period in May 2016, involved 2026 people, the majority of whom were full members but some of whom were £3 supporters. The difference is that all those in our survey had joined the Party *after* the general election. This gives us a particular insight to 'new members' and gives us slightly bigger sub-samples, demographic and otherwise.

We asked two questions relevant to the Inquiry and include the results in an appendix to this submission. The first related to the perceptions in which *The Times* was also interested. The second to prejudices in general, tapping into them using a question used in the long-running European Values Survey.

On the question of whether there was or wasn't an antisemitism problem in the Party, the answers from the sample as a whole ran as follows:

There has been quite a lot of news coverage recently about antisemitism in the Labour Party. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

It is a serious and genuine problem that the party leadership needs to take urgent action to address: **9%**
It is a genuine problem, but its extent is being deliberately exaggerated to damage Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle criticism of Israel: **32%**
It is not a serious problem at all, and is being hyped up to undermine Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel: **55%**

None of these: **1%**
Don't know: **3%**

It is clear from these figures that very few (just 10%) of Labour's post-2015 General election members are inclined to see antisemitism as a serious problem that needs addressing urgently. A third (32 per cent) do see it as a genuine problem but think it is being deliberately exaggerated. But a clear majority (55 per cent) do not see antisemitism as a serious problem at all and believe it is being hyped either to damage the party and its leader or to stifle criticism of Israel. Taken together, and irrespective of whether they think it is a genuine problem, nearly nine out of ten of Labour's 'new members' think antisemitism has been exploited either by the Party's (and/or the Party leadership's) opponents and/or by those wishing to stifle criticism of Israel.

Looking more closely at the results, it is clear that those who joined the Party (and/or upgraded their registration as supporters to full membership) during or after the leadership contest – those, in other words, who are most likely to be fans of Mr Corbyn and the direction in which he is taking the Party – are significantly less likely to see antisemitism as a problem and significantly more likely to see it as a problem whipped up by his (and Labour's) enemies and by supporters of Israel. Among those who converted their £3 registration to membership, nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) believe 'antisemitism is not a serious problem at all, and is being hyped up to undermine Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel'. The figures for those who joined during the leadership contest and those who joined after it are 61 and 67 per cent respectively.

Interestingly, those who are £3 registered supporters seem less inclined than average (48 per cent) to take this view, raising the possibility (but only the possibility) that some of them may have been put off converting their membership by the controversy.

What is also noticeable, in view of previous comments about the capital, is that the view that 'antisemitism is not a serious problem at all' is less likely to be shared by new members in the capital than it is elsewhere (45 per cent in London vs. 58 per cent in the rest of the South, Midlands and Wales, and the North - and 47% in Scotland), suggesting the possibility (but again only the possibility) that they have experienced it in their own CLPs.

The other very marked difference revolves around age. Some 62 per cent of Labour's post GE2015 membership who are aged between 50 and 64 believe that 'antisemitism is not a serious problem at all,' but only 31 per cent of those aged between 18 and 25 share that view. Why that is, we cannot say for sure: it may have something to do with older 'new members' having a long tradition of ambivalence or even antipathy towards Israel, but that is just one of a number of speculative explanations.

Interestingly, if we perform further analysis and break down the answers to the first question according to whether or not members and £3 supporters said they'd vote for Jeremy Corbyn if there were another leadership contest, we see that the problem

might have its roots in factional politics. More than two thirds (69 per cent) of those who would vote for Corbyn think antisemitism is not a serious problem at all, whereas two thirds (67 per cent) of those who would vote for whoever stood against Jeremy Corbyn think antisemitism is a serious and genuine problem. Those that would make up their mind depending on who the other candidates were in this putative leadership contest are split down the the middle.

What we can say, moving on to the second question we asked which is relevant to the Inquiry, however, is that Labour's post-GE2015 membership does not appear to be essentially prejudiced against Jews as measured by the European Values Survey indicator we used. As even the briefest of looks at the question in the appendix, which asks about who respondents would object to having as neighbours, barely any Labour members or registered supporters (one per cent) would have a problem with Jews. This contrasts with 81 per cent who would prefer not to live next door to right-wing extremists and 69 per cent who would have a problem with drug addicts.

Of course, especially given the salience of the story, it may well be that members and supporters who would, in fact, prefer not to have Jews as neighbours were masking their true feelings. What was interesting was that this was not the case when it came to their feelings about other ethnic/religious minorities: some 4 per cent admitted they wouldn't want Muslims as neighbours and a very striking 25 per cent said the same about Gypsies/Roma. Given the Inquiry wants to look at other forms of racism, this may be worth noting.

Conclusion

Context isn't everything but it matters. Political prejudice against Jews in Britain isn't widespread but it hasn't altogether gone away, although it is not particularly high, it should be said, among Labour voters, especially when compared to those voters who favour UKIP.

Labour's members and registered supporters (as opposed to those who simply express an intention to vote for it) do not appear (if we take their answers at face values) as a group to be essentially anti-Semitic – at least in the sense, say, of not wanting to live near Jewish people.

However, they are noticeably disinclined to think that the Party has a problem with antisemitism, and even many of those who do, believe it has been got up by the media, critics of Mr Corbyn and perhaps friends of Israel.

The disinclination to think there is a problem that needs addressing, and the inclination to think it is being exploited by enemies, is especially strong among those who joined the party after the general election. But it is even stronger among those who are presumably the biggest fans of the current leadership. It is, however, weaker among younger than among middle-aged and older members and supporters.

All of this means that, should the Inquiry find that antisemitism is a serious problem that needs dealing with rapidly, the Party will have a huge internal as well as external communication task on its hands.

Appendix

T. Bale, P. Webb & M. Poletti, ESRC Party Members Project, *Labour Party post-GE2015 Members and Supporters Survey*, May 2016

Unweighted Sample

Total	Membership Type			Membership length			
	Full Member	Was £3 - New Member	ALL POST GE2015 MEMBERS	£3	Before Leadership Election	During Leadership Election	After Leadership Election
2026	876	280	1156	870	393	344	399

There has been quite a lot of news coverage recently about anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

It is a serious and genuine problem that the party leadership needs to take urgent action to address	9	7	1	5	13	10	4	2
It is a genuine problem, but its extent is being deliberately exaggerated to damage Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle criticism of Israel	32	33	26	31	33	33	33	28
It is not a serious problem at all, and is being hyped up to undermine Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel	55	57	72	61	48	54	61	67
None of these	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1
Don't know	3	2	1	2	5	2	2	2

On this list are various groups of people. Could you please tell us any that you would NOT, generally speaking, like to have as neighbours? (Tick as many as apply)

Right wing extremists	81	81	85	82	79	80	80	86
Drug addicts	69	68	63	67	72	68	68	66
Heavy drinkers	56	55	51	54	59	55	53	54
Emotionally unstable people	27	23	27	24	31	22	27	24
People with a criminal record	25	23	22	23	28	27	19	22
Gypsies	25	22	19	21	31	22	19	22
People with large families	20	19	19	19	22	19	18	19
Committed Christians	16	15	16	15	17	11	19	17
Left wing extremists	14	12	10	12	17	12	13	10
Muslims	4	3	2	3	5	3	2	4
Immigrants/foreign workers	4	3	3	3	5	3	3	3
People of a different race	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Gay people	1	1	0	1	2	1	1	1
Jews	1	1	0	1	2	1	1	1
None of these	8	9	8	9	7	8	11	8

Unweighted Sample

	Gender		Age					Social Grade					Region				
	Total	Male	Female	18-24	25-49	50-64	65+	AB	C1	C2	DE	London	Rest of South	Midlands / Wales	North	Scotland	
2026	1030	996	121	690	701	497	999	529	162	263	342	677	376	544	87		

There has been quite a lot of news coverage recently about anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

It is a serious and genuine problem that the party leadership needs to take urgent action to address	9	10	7	10	8	9	10	10	7	6	8	13	7	7	8	14
It is a genuine problem, but its extent is being deliberately exaggerated to damage Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle criticism of Israel	32	30	34	55	37	25	28	32	36	26	30	38	30	30	31	39
It is not a serious problem at all, and is being hyped up to undermine Labour and Jeremy Corbyn, or to stifle legitimate criticism of Israel	55	56	55	31	50	62	59	54	54	62	57	45	58	58	58	47
None of these	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	0
Don't know	3	3	4	2	4	3	2	3	3	5	4	3	4	3	2	0

On this list are various groups of people. Could you please tell us any that you would NOT, generally speaking, like to have as neighbours? (Tick as many as apply)

Flight wing extremists	81	78	83	83	83	78	81	82	81	77	74	77	83	81	80	76
Drug addicts	69	68	70	60	67	70	73	70	67	70	67	65	70	67	71	71
Heavy drinkers	56	53	58	51	50	57	64	57	54	55	56	54	59	54	55	51
Emotionally unstable people	27	30	24	19	25	28	31	29	25	27	27	27	28	24	28	25
People with a criminal record	25	26	25	29	24	26	25	25	25	30	25	27	25	26	24	26
Gypsies	25	29	21	26	24	27	25	24	26	28	25	22	26	24	28	24
People with large families	20	22	18	12	19	23	20	21	19	21	22	20	21	18	21	17
Committed Christians	16	18	15	12	15	17	17	16	16	17	18	15	19	16	15	16
Left wing extremists	14	16	12	11	13	12	18	15	12	12	14	13	13	13	15	18
Muslims	4	4	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	7	5	2	4	5	4	5
Immigrants/foreign workers	4	4	3	2	3	5	5	3	3	6	7	1	4	5	5	6
People of a different race	1	1	1	0	0	1	2	1	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Gay people	1	2	0	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	2
Jews	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	2
None of these	8	9	7	7	8	8	8	7	8	7	13	11	6	7	8	11

Response of the Equality and Human Rights Commission to the Call for Evidence:

Call for evidence details

Title:	Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates
Source of consultation:	Committee on Standards in Public Life
Date:	15 September 2017

For more information please contact

Name of EHRC contact providing response and their office address:	
Rebecca Thomas	
Telephone number:	
Mobile number:	
Email address:	

About the Equality and Human Rights Commission

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is a statutory body established under the Equality Act 2006. It operates independently to encourage equality and diversity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, and protect and promote human rights. It contributes to making and keeping Britain a fair society in which everyone, regardless of background, has an equal opportunity to fulfil their potential. The Commission enforces equality legislation on age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. It encourages compliance with the Human Rights Act 1998 and is accredited by the UN as an 'A status' National Human Rights Institution. Find out more about the Commission's work at: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Summary

The Commission welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence on the nature and degree of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates. Since our inception, we have worked to understand and tackle harassment, hostility and hatred. We hope that our unique experience as the statutory body tasked with enforcing the Equality Act 2010 and promoting compliance by the UK with its obligations under domestic and international human rights law will assist the Committee.

Harassment and/or intimidation in any form are unacceptable. Everyone has the right to freedom from discrimination, and from inhumane or degrading treatment, and parliamentary candidates and public office holders are no exception. Given their role to represent and serve constituents in a democracy, their safety is vital. The Commission takes a zero tolerance approach to hate crime of any degree targeted at a person because of their disability, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, or because they are transgender.

It is essential to a healthy democracy that everyone is able to participate in political and civic life and has the freedom to express their opinions and influence the local and national agenda.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right which is also essential for democracy. It is protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights as incorporated into domestic law by the Human Rights Act 1998, and also in common law. The law protects not only uncontroversial opinions, but also those that may 'shock, offend and disturb'. And indeed, this protection is extended yet further during political campaigns, when the right to freely debate ideas and issues is critical.

However, freedom of expression is not an absolute right, and can be restricted, particularly when it relates to inciting violence or hatred against individuals.

The increasingly hostile and aggressive nature of public debate and behaviour towards people from different protected groups makes it essential for the UK Government and political parties to take effective action to address manifestations of harassment, hostility and hate crime directed towards candidates and

Parliamentarians, while ensuring that our fundamental right to freedom of expression is protected.

Examples include the tragic politically-driven murder of Jo Cox MP; charged political campaigns such as the recent election of Sadiq Khan as Mayor of London; and racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, homophobic, disabilist, and misogynist abuse of Parliamentarians including the well documented hostility directed towards Diane Abbott, Luciana Berger, Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, Angela Eagle, and more recently, Jared O'Mara.

In our response to this call for evidence we will respond specifically to the inquiry questions on:

1. Whether social media has changed the nature, scale or effect of intimidation of Parliamentary candidates;
2. Whether existing legislation is effective in addressing intimidation of Parliamentary candidates;
3. What role political parties should play in addressing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates; and
4. Whether experiencing intimidation discourages people from standing for political office.

We will also explore the tensions between freedom of expression and unlawful hate speech. Our response relates primarily to the UK Parliament, but occasionally refers to devolved issues where helpful to understand action that is being taken in other parts of Britain.

Role of social media

Particular attention should be paid to online harassment, hostility and hatred. Anonymity and the ease and convenience of using the medium of social media makes it a very effective tool to promulgate hate and abuse, with extensive reach.

The rise of online hate speech and harassment through the medium of social media is well documented in Britain. The Commission's research into the causes and motivations of hate crime found that cyber hate is a growing phenomenon which, reporting figures suggest, vastly outnumbers offline hate crime. For example, 74% of all anti-Muslim hostility reported to the charity Tell MAMA, a third-party reporting platform for anti-Muslim attacks and other incidents, occurred online, compared with 26% which involved offline incidentsⁱ. The emerging challenge of capturing and tackling the large number of online hate incidentsⁱⁱ ('cyber' hate) estimated to occur each day is a challenge for law enforcement agenciesⁱⁱⁱ.

Research undertaken by Demos in 2016^{iv} explored the scale of misogynistic abuse through Twitter, and Amnesty UK's recent analysis of the online abuse experienced by women MPs in the run up to the 2017 general election^v indicates that black and Asian women MPs in Westminster received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs. Diane Abbott MP received nearly a third of all online abuse recorded in this survey, which found that intersectionality of identities, such as race and sex, drove particularly high levels of abuse. Earlier this year, Police Scotland confirmed

they were looking into abusive tweets directed at Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon.

More recent research by Demos also explored the increase in anti-Islamic sentiment on Twitter in relation to significant terrorist attacks^{vi}. While the findings are concerning, there is some comfort to be found in the fact that evidence indicates that Twitter is also used widely to counter hate speech and offensive narratives. Although this is positive, the onus should not be on users to counter hate speech, and the processes by which users can report online abuse and harassment need to be greatly improved.

In October 2016, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee highlighted the 'viscerally anti-Semitic nature and volume of tweets directed specifically at Members of Parliament'^{vii} and recommended that Twitter expand its enforcement remit and devote more resources to identifying abusive users.

In our submission to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into hate crime, we noted and endorsed the concerns raised by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in relation to online hate speech, and its concluding observation that the UK Government should 'adopt comprehensive measures to combat racist hate speech and xenophobic political discourse, including on the Internet, particularly with regard to the application of appropriate sanctions'.

We are now seeing a number of approaches to address the increasing problem of online abuse. In 2016 the European Commission, in conjunction with several social media companies including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, announced a Code of Conduct on illegal online hate speech^{viii}. This code sets out a number of commitments to address conduct that incites violence or hatred on the grounds of an individual's race, colour, descent, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. It does not cover any other protected characteristic.

Earlier this year, a review of the code's effectiveness indicated that while a number of challenges still remain, there had been significant progress. For example, in the six months the code had been in operation, the number of posts removed for offensive or illegal content had doubled, and the number of notifications reviewed within 24 hours had increased by 11%^{ix}. We welcome this code and will be watching closely to see how effective voluntary approaches are.

Germany has also recently legislated to fine social media companies up to €50m if they persistently fail to remove illegal conduct from their sites^x. We will be observing the implementation of this legislation closely in order to learn from their approach.

In April 2017, the Home Affairs Committee published the report of its inquiry into online hate crime^{xi}. This report contained a number of recommendations for social media companies to take greater responsibility for preventing and responding to hate crime offences on their platforms. They also asked for the government to review the entire legislative framework governing online hate speech and harassment, to ensure that it was fit for purpose.

The relevant legal framework

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and extends to the expression of views that may shock, disturb or offend the beliefs of others. But this right is not absolute and can be limited if, for example, the aim is to protect others from violence and discrimination.^{xii}

As a result of increased public dialogue about the nature of free speech, the Commission published guidance on freedom of expression in 2015^{xiii}. We explain there are legitimate ways the state may restrict what we can say, but that democracy depends on people being free to express, debate and criticise opposing viewpoints, and much that is offensive or insulting is still protected by Article 10. It also explains how freedom of expression can be restricted in certain circumstances, for example, where someone incites violence against others or promotes hatred based on the colour of someone's skin or their sexual orientation or religion.

The boundary between the expression of intolerant or offensive views and hate speech is not always an easy one to draw, and a wide degree of tolerance is accorded to political speech and debate during election campaigns, and also to the media. We recognise that the preservation of pluralism and diversity in a democratic society depends on the freedom to exchange ideas, express robust opinions and conduct dialogue and debate in a way that may upset others, as long as it is within the limits of the law.

Section 106 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 also makes it illegal to make false or misleading statements about the personal character or conduct of an election candidate during an election period. The Election Court upheld a complaint by the unsuccessful Liberal Democrat candidate about the conduct of the Labour MP Phil Woolas during the 2010 General Election, as a consequence of which Mr Woolas was required to vacate his seat, resulting in a by-election. Mr Woolas appealed unsuccessfully against this verdict^{xiv}. The High Court held that the restriction on the right to freedom of expression was in this case permissible because false statements undermined free and fair elections.

At first glance, the section 106 offence would not apply to many kinds of hate speech since it only prohibits false or misleading statements about a candidate's 'personal character or conduct' while hate speech is generally directed at social groups. However, a false or misleading statement about a candidate's ethnic or religious group could lead to prosecution. Examples would include an election pamphlet that suggested that a candidate's religious beliefs made him sympathetic to terrorists.

Hate crime legislation

In 2014, following a major report into the scale and nature of disability-related harassment, at the request of the Commission, the Law Commission undertook a review of hate crime legislation^{xv} for England and Wales. It set out a number of recommendations, including the need for a full scale review of all the legislation governing hate crime.

We have recommended that the UK Government commit to the Law Commission recommendation for this full scale review and to also include legislation that governs online hate speech. This is important because the main legal provisions in this field, in particular section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and section 127 of the Communications Act 2003, in great part predate the era of mass social media use. This recommendation was picked up by the Home Affairs Select Committee. We understand that the Government is considering its response to the Law Commission's review, but we are not clear on when this response will be made public. We feel this is an important consideration in the context of this review.

We also welcome the recent Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) announcement that online hate crime will be treated as seriously as offline incidents^{xvi} and their recently published guidelines^{xvii} on prosecuting online hate crime in England and Wales. However these need to be supported by a comprehensive and effective legislative framework, and the sentencing guidelines and powers which require the courts to increase the length of sentences for certain hate crimes must also be used more consistently, and monitored, so that potential perpetrators are sent a clear message that hate crimes will not be tolerated.

The recent launch of the Metropolitan Police's Online Hate Crime Hub scheme^{xviii}, a two year pilot programme which aims to improve the way in which online hate crimes are investigated, is also welcome. This scheme recognises the complexity of tackling online hate crime, and the importance of engaging with community groups, social media companies and the CPS to develop effective responses. We will be interested to see the outcome of this pilot and to what extent it manages to address incidents of online hate crime.

In Scotland, as in England and Wales, there are a number of offences under common law and legislation that apply to online bullying and harassment. The Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS), Scotland's prosecution service, published guidance in 2014 on prosecuting communications sent by social media^{xix}.

Hate crime in Scotland is largely a devolved matter for the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government commissioned an independent review of hate crime in 2015. The Independent Advisory Group on Hate Crime, Prejudice and Community Cohesion reported in September 2016^{xx}. The Independent Advisory Group looked at a wide range of factors that could combat hate crime and prejudice. It concluded that the language used around hate crime was unclear and recommended that Scottish Government should explore this further. It also recommended that further consideration should be given to the scope of existing hate crime legislation and whether it should be extended.

The Scottish Government has subsequently set up a review of hate crime legislation chaired by Lord Bracadale to carry out an independent review of hate crime legislation in Scotland. The Commission in Scotland is participating in the reference group overseeing the review. This review is expected to report on its recommendations on changes to hate crime legislation in early 2018.

International human rights obligations

The United Kingdom has signed and ratified a number of international conventions which include obligations relating to hate crime, including the abovementioned International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). As a matter of international law, the UK is bound to respect, protect and fulfil the rights contained in these conventions.

The UN has recently made a number of recommendations to the UK Government on what it should do to tackle hate crime. The Commission is tasked by statute with promoting compliance by the UK with its obligations under international human rights law. In August 2016, UN CERD issued recommendations to the United Kingdom on what it should do to tackle hate crime. While these recommendations relate specifically to race, they have wider relevance for tackling hate crime related to other characteristics.

The Commission notes the concerns raised by UN CERD in relation to online hate speech and its concluding observation that the UK Government should ‘adopt comprehensive measures to combat racist hate speech and xenophobic political discourse, including on the Internet, particularly with regard to the application of appropriate sanctions’.^{xxi} The Commission agrees with the Committee’s observations which mirror the concerns we raised in our July 2016 CERD submission ‘Race rights in the UK’.^{xxii}

In its August 2016 concluding observations, the UN CERD requested an update from the UK on its recommendations regarding hate speech and hate crime within one year. In our update report to the CERD^{xxiii}, submitted in August 2017, we noted the abuse and intimidation experienced by Members of Parliament, particularly in the context of the June 2017 general election, much of it motivated by racial or religious prejudice. We also highlighted reports indicating a rise in online hate speech, especially following the EU referendum.

Earlier this year, CEDAW published a new general comment^{xxiv} stating that state parties should develop and implement measures to encourage social media companies, amongst others, to ‘eliminate discrimination against women’. They specified that measures should include the creation or development of voluntary mechanisms to address ‘gender-based violence against women that takes place through their services and platforms’.

Article 17 of the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women^{xxv} echoes this comment. The UK Government has signed but not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention, though it affirmed its intention to take the steps to do so in June 2017^{xxvi}.

Responsibilities of Political Parties

Much is said and reported about the adversarial style of political discourse in the House of Commons Chamber. Unprofessional, sexist and exclusionary language

and behaviour should have no place in the House. There is a risk that such discourse normalises abusive and intimidatory language towards elected officials.

We believe that there is a responsibility on all political parties and Parliament to address hostile treatment of politicians, and to address offensive speech and culture more broadly. Our elected representatives and the media (mainstream as well as social) should reflect and foster the best values of our society and engage people on contentious issues in a responsible and considered way.

While the Equality Act 2010 applies to certain activities of political parties, it does not cover campaigning in an election period nor conduct during proceedings in Parliament. Neither political parties nor candidates are subject to section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the public sector equality duty). However, the Equality Act 2010 does apply to how political parties select candidates for elections, and may also apply to the conduct of councillors and MPs if they are exercising a public function or when they are providing a service to the public.

The Commission published guidance (Equality and Human Rights Law during an Election Period^{xxvii}) prior to the 2015 General Election. This document was subsequently reissued for the 2017 local and general elections, and was disseminated by the Electoral Commission and Local Government Association, amongst others. The guidance provided advice for political parties and candidates, and local authorities, on freedom of expression and restrictions prescribed by law. It also provided information on how to complain and the role of regulators during elections, and how to report hate crime. The guidance was widely welcomed by parties and we will be revising and reissuing for future elections.

Prior to the 2017 General Election we also published an open letter to all political parties^{xxviii}, as well as a set of voluntary principles on standards for political discourse. These called on parties to commit to ensuring that their members, whether elected representatives, candidates or campaigners, refrain from using racist, Islamophobic or anti-Semitic language or materials likely to generate division, and to deal effectively with complaints of such behaviour made against their representatives. That way political parties can role model positive and constructive public debate.

In 2013, the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism undertook an inquiry into electoral conduct, with particular focus on discrimination and racism. They set out a number of recommendations for a range of bodies, including the police, the Commission, and political parties themselves. The final update report^{xxix} by the APPG reports that it had been difficult to secure any progress towards meeting those recommendations, which ranged from improving welfare support to members to providing training on discrimination and racism. They also noted that political parties had still failed to do more to prepare candidates for the ruthless nature of campaigning. We would encourage all parties to consider ways in which they could meet those recommendations.

The wider recommendations of this report are also worth looking at in some detail as they extend beyond party activity to include, amongst other issues, the importance of an effective legislative framework, and improved police reporting processes and victim support.

Barriers to standing for elected or appointed public offices

Unequal representation in public life reflects and accentuates inequality in society and the narrower the range of backgrounds in public life, the narrower the range of experiences that are brought to bear in political decision making. This can ultimately result in exclusive and unresponsive political systems. Lack of diversity in public life can make diverse candidates ‘stand out’ as targets for abuse and hate campaigns.

The 2017 election saw an increase in the diversity of candidates. But progress is slow and difficult to measure.

Despite an increase since the 2015 election, with 208 MPs elected, women still only make up 32% of the Commons.

The recently published House of Commons Library paper into Ethnic Minorities in Politics and Public Life^{xxx} also sets out the levels of under-representation of MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds. Only around 8% of MPs are BAME, compared to 13.6% of the population as a whole, and only 12.5% of women MPs are from an ethnic minority.

Disabled people are also under-represented in political office and public appointments^{xxxi}, and face continued challenges to achieving equal representation. For example, it is estimated less than 1% of MPs elected in 2017 were disabled compared to estimates that up to 20% of the working population are disabled (including long-term health conditions such as diabetes). Extensive research (see below) into the barriers to political participation also indicates a negative impact of a hostile working environment on efforts to increase diversity.

There is an urgent need for the implementation of section 106 of the Equality Act 2010^{xxxii}, which requires political parties to publish diversity data about their Parliamentary candidates. Enacting section 106 will establish a robust evidence base in regards to how well represented particular protected characteristics are in Westminster.

The recent Government Response to the Women and Equalities Committee Report^{xxxiii} on Women in the House of Commons has proposed not to accept any of the Committee’s recommendations. The Commission regrets this includes not enacting Section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 and we encourage the Government to reconsider this position. In the meantime, we encourage political parties to gather and publish this data voluntarily, and we are reassured to see that both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have started to do so.

Our 2011 Pathway to Politics report^{xxxiv} explored the relationship between common routes into politics and under-representation of groups protected by the Equality Act 2010, such as disabled people. The findings suggested focusing on re-framing debate to include the positive electoral consequences for all of having more diverse candidates.

The research also explored the common barriers facing under-represented groups seeking elected office. These varied from prejudiced or discriminatory attitudes at

local party levels (e.g. women being asked about their family plans or marital status, ethnic minorities being asked about their religion or belief, a perception of disability to mean ‘inability’) to financial costs. Election to Parliament is usually the last step in a long process of civic and/or political participation, and these barriers at the grassroots level limit the experience of diverse candidates and therefore their potential to eventually become Members of Parliament.

The findings also indicated the existence of unconscious bias towards, white, middle aged, middle class and professional men, often reflecting the characteristics of those selecting candidates and of previously successful candidates. The informal, unwritten rules and conventions governing politics, including ‘knowing how to play the game’, work to exclude those who do not meet this model of the archetypal candidate. Established cliques and systems of informal patronage within parties have the effect of reinforcing existing under-representation.

Particularly relevant was the finding that *‘the House of Commons has a reputation for not embracing difference and being a male-dominated environment... The adversarial and ‘yah boo’ culture was seen as off-putting to under-represented groups and there was a sense that the House of Commons was reluctant to instigate radical change’* (p. ix)

These findings are echoed by those in the recent Fawcett Society report *‘Does Local Government Work for Women’*^{xxxv} which found that ‘an outdated sexist culture’ dominated many town halls in England and Wales. It detailed widespread sexist practices and sexual harassment that goes unchecked and unchallenged. The report goes on to recommend a formal commitment to equality in councillors’ codes of conduct, and the need for a commitment from all the political parties to provide leadership to effect change.

Political parties are key gatekeepers to political office, as well as wider civic participation. There is a great deal more that the parties could and should be doing to ensure that they select more diverse candidates and ensure equality of participation amongst MPs once they are elected to the House of Commons.

Finally, The Good Parliament report^{xxxvi} published in 2016, which followed the Speakers Conference on Representation, sets out 43 recommendations for a more representative and inclusive House of Commons. The report states that the House of Commons as an institution should acknowledge its collective responsibility to redress current limitations in representation and inclusion. The recommendations cover a wide range of issues including enacting section 106 of the Equality Act and securing cross-party support for a concord regarding what constitutes unacceptable and unprofessional behaviour in the Chamber. Enacting these may help ensure diverse and inclusive representatives in our political and public life.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Commission believes there are a number of actions that can be undertaken which would help prevent and address the critical issue of online abuse.

We recommend that:

- The UK Government commit to a full-scale review of hate crime offences and enhanced sentencing powers in England and Wales, in recognition that the piecemeal development of the legislation that applies to this area has resulted in an unequal and overly complex array of legal provisions rendering it difficult to secure fair and appropriate access to justice for victims.
- The review should include a review of relevant legislation to ensure offences effectively balance sanctions for abuse and hate speech with the right to freedom of expression in private electronic communications
- UK Government to consider developing and implementing measures to ensure more social media companies remove offensive and abusive content, similar to models and approaches taken in other countries.
- Police and other criminal justice agencies improve intelligence derived from data collection to inform practice in relation to both online and offline demonstrations of hostility and hatred to elected officials, for example by adopting more consistent data collection methods across the country to allow comparative and chronological analysis.
- Police and other criminal justice agencies improve support to victims and witnesses to report both online and offline hostility and intimidation; and parties set up systems and structures to provide support to members, candidates and MPs experiencing online abuse.
- The UK Government enacts section 106 of the Equality Act. This would require political parties to monitor and publish diversity information of their candidates so that we have a better understanding of progress towards more diverse political representation which may or may not be curtailed or hindered by perceived or real hostility towards and intimidation of elected officials. We are disappointed that the Government has stated it will not do so, and encourage them to reconsider.
- The UK Government should work with political parties to reinstate or replace the Access to Elected Office fund, which provided funding for disability related costs for disabled people to stand as candidates, in time for the next general and local elections. This will help embed a culture of a level playing field for all candidates and elected officials and help normalise the presence of disabled elected officials.
- Political parties should sign up to the set of voluntary principles on standards for political discourse that the Commission published last year, to ensure that members refrain from using offensive language or materials, and to implement processes to deal effectively with complaints of such behaviour made against their representatives
- The UK Government should invest in further research into online abuse of this kind as an extension of offline gender and race relations which are marked by misogyny, violence against women and girls and institutional racism, as well

as in relation to other bias motivated hostility, including disability, religion or belief, age, sexual orientation and transgender status.

- The UK Government ensures human rights are complied with when addressing harassment, hostility and hate crime^{xxxvii}.

ⁱ Copsey, N., Dack, J., Littler, M. and Feldman, M. (2013), *Anti-Muslim hate crime and the Far Right*. Available at: https://www.tees.ac.uk/docs/DocRepo/Research/Copsey_report3.pdf, referenced in Walters, Brown and Wiedlitzka (2016), *Causes and motivations of hate crime*. Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 102. Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/research-report-102-causes-andmotivations-hate-crime> [Accessed 21 July 2016].

ⁱⁱ Chakraborti, N. and Garland, J. (2012), 'Reconceptualising hate crime victimization through the lens of vulnerability and "Difference"'. *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 499-514; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2012), *Facing up to Offending: Use of restorative justice in the criminal justice system*. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectores.gov.uk/hmic/media/facing-up-to-offending-20120918.pdf> [Accessed 30 August 2016]; Walters, M. A. (2014), *Hate Crime and Restorative Justice: Exploring Causes, Repairing Harms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Walters, M. A. (2013), 'Why the Rochdale Gang should have been sentenced as "hate crime" offenders', *Criminal Law Review*, vol. 2, pp. 131-44

ⁱⁱⁱ Even if the offending material is published on a website hosted overseas, it may be possible for a criminal offence to be prosecuted if a substantial measure of the activity that constitutes the offence, such as composing, editing and uploading material to an overseas server, takes place in England, Wales or Scotland, where the offence applies

^{iv} <https://www.demos.co.uk/blog/misogyny-online/> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^v <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-violence-women-mps> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{vi} <https://www.demos.co.uk/project/anti-islamic-content-on-twitter/> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{vii} <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/136/13610.htm> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{viii} http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-1937_en.htm [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{ix} http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1471_en.htm [Accessed 12.09.17]

^x <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jun/30/germany-approves-plans-to-fine-social-media-firms-up-to-50m> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{xi} <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/609/60902.htm> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{xiii} <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/freedom-expression-legal-framework>

^{xiv} *Woolas, R. (on the application of) v Speaker of the House of Commons* (2010).

^{xv} <https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/project/hate-crime/> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{xvi} http://www.cps.gov.uk/news/latest_news/cps-publishes-new-public-statements/ [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{xvii} http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/communications_sent_via_social_media/ [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{xviii} <https://shar.es/1VaGzI>

^{xix}

http://www.copfs.gov.uk/images/Documents/Prosecution_Policy_Guidance/Book_of_Regulations/Final%20version%2026%2011%2014.pdf

^{xx} <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/09/3565> [Accessed 12.09.17]

^{xxi} http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/GBR/CERD_C_GBR_CO_21-23_24985_E.pdf [Accessed 12.09.17]

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- xxii https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/.../race-rights-in-the-uk-july-2016_0.pdf
- xxiii <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/race-rights-uk-submission-un-committee-elimination-racial-discrimination>
- xxiv http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/35&Lang=en [Accessed 12.09.17]
- xxv <http://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention> [Accessed 12.09.17]
- xxvi <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-measures-to-allow-ratification-of-istanbul-convention> [Accessed 12.09.17]
- xxvii <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/equality-and-human-rights-law-during-election-period-guidance-local-authorities>
- xxviii <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/standards-political-discussion-letter-all-political-parties>
- xxix <https://files.graph.cool/cj3e6rg8y906h0104uh8bojao/cj4sjq5ig01ii0111biq3f3ft>
- xxx <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN01156> [Accessed 12.09.17]
- xxxi <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/being-disabled-britain-journey-less-equal>
- xxxii <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/106> [Accessed 12.09.17]
- xxxiii <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-women-and-equalities-committees-report> [Accessed 12.09.17]
- xxxiv <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/research-report-65-pathways-politics>
- xxxv <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/does-local-government-work-for-women-final-report-of-the-local-government-commission>
- xxxvi <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2016/july/female-prime-minister.html> [Accessed 12.09.17]

Joy Morrissey

I could take the endless hysterical abuse directed at me personally on a daily basis. But when they started attacking members of my campaign team - particularly Asian females - then I really did feel that they had crossed a line. In addition to vandalism of our Ealing Conservative campaign office, a particularly nasty attack took place at the home of one young Asian female supporter where they spray painted 'die s' on her wall and 'f***** c*** and die' on her car along with defacing her campaigning posters with further death threats and swastikas.

She was also told on the doorstep that she deserved to die for being a Conservative and her parents should disown her. As if this wasn't bad enough it got to the point that I didn't feel it was safe for myself or any Asian females to go out alone to canvass.

Mohamed Ali also received a huge amount of abuse as well as death threats. One anonymous Labour troll made the outrageous accusation on Twitter - subsequently withdrawn - that I was paying Somali supporters to canvass on my behalf. In reply, my friend Mohamed Ali said that they supported me because no one had put in more time and effort helping them. He also asked why Labour thought that all black voters were in their back pocket and how an anonymous slur on an ethnic community fitted with Labour's supposed anti-racist agenda. He had to endure a great deal of abuse throughout the campaign but the intimidation during the General Election was beyond anything he had ever experienced before.

According to Mohamed it all started with the picture that went viral during the General Election taken and posted by Labour activists coming out of Ruskin Hall. What followed was completely unexpected. <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.buzzfeed.com/amhtml/ikrd/somali-tories-are-furious-they-were-accused-of-being-paid>

- Name calling such as the "N" work
- Mohamed and other Conservative Somalis were called sell-outs by the Somali diaspora and non Somalis
- The charity the Anti-Tribalism Movement (ATM) was subject to a campaign of immense hatred from Labour Somali voters to the point where Fidow, Bishara and Adam Maten could no longer come out and campaign for me or the party
- Abdirashid Fidow had to take some time off work due to stress
- On Election Day, Labour activists recognised Mohamed walking down Horn Lane and took additional pictures of him though thankfully he hasn't seen them posted anywhere. That's not to say they haven't been posted on private left wing forums
- Mohamed reported the abuse to both the Labour party and the Metropolitan Police but nothing has come of these

reports

- The owner of a cafe on Church Road, W3 suffered loss of business for supporting the Conservative party and his picture also went viral on Facebook
- A Somali online so-called media outlet ran a negative story about the Somali Conservatives and a decision was taken by the Somali Conservative committee to close our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Dasloor/videos/1710036729290283/> - I was bitterly disappointed by this decision but had to respect the committee's wishes

Throughout the campaign Ealing Central and Acton seemed to receive more abuse and activism from Momentum than anywhere else.

This was on top of the constant lies Rupa Huq was printing and repeatedly saying herself during the campaign. Stephen Pound MP actually phoned me several times towards the end of the campaign to warn me about the article her campaign team was trying to get published in the Mirror. He thought they had totally crossed the line as all the lies and slander were both unethical and illegal. My one criticism of CCHQ is that their press team failed to see a pattern of The Mirror targeting, door-stepping and harassing Conservative candidates in Labour marginal seats. The Ealing Gazette refused to run the story Rupa's team tried to plant in the press because the local journalist thought it was a ridiculous story with no relevance to the campaign. The appalling lengths to which Rupa Huq was willing to go to win were truly shocking. In the final days of the campaign my husband became so worried about my personal safety - and what steps would need to be taken to protect me after the election - that he actually seemed relieved when I lost. The lies Rupa Huq was telling to constituents were the most destructive because they targeted certain ethnic and religious communities where lies of that nature about an American born female could be extremely damaging. The bile and hate that came from Rupa personally and her campaign team are impossible to justify and were completely unnecessary. Why go to such lengths? That was the part that was truly frightening. It was clear that she and her Momentum supporters were prepared to say and do almost anything in order to win. Not only do we as Conservatives not harbour that level of hatred but we would never go to the vile lengths to which the hard left is willing to go to keep their candidate and their ideology in place. It is not surprising that the two witnesses I had for my criminal libel case against Rupa Huq withdrew their testimony out of sheer terror about the personal risk they would

run in testifying. And who could blame them for being fearful about coming forward and becoming a target for Momentum.

To sum up, during an attempt to take part in the democratic process a Conservative candidate was subject to abuse, physical intimidation, libel and slander. Civil, criminal and electoral law was broken. The police had to be involved on numerous occasions. In any other form of endeavour this would be considered an outrage and acted upon - we will be doing ourselves and our loyal supporters (also victims of this abuse) a great disservice if we do not.

Finally, last week in the House of Commons the Labour Party pointed out that several of their MPs have been subject to abuse. That is true and of course completely unacceptable. But there is a fundamental difference in our experience: the victims in their party are small in number and almost without exception high profile. The victims in the Conservative Party are vast in number and of high profile, low profile and no profile. It is across the board.

Conservatives, whether members of Parliament, party members or just voters are subject to endless denigration as a direct result of Labour's socially divisive rhetoric and assumed moral superiority. As a direct result of their use of the word 'Tory' as a term of abuse. And as a direct result of them demonising their political opponents and by extension the millions of their fellow citizens that support them. Labour should not be allowed to deflect attention from this issue by comparing the molehill of abuse suffered by a small number of high profile individuals (Diane Abbott is the one most often cited) with the mountain of abuse that is heaped upon many thousands of Conservatives at every level.

Where Labour people do suffer abuse, it is almost exclusively via social media. They are not liable to be insulted, spat at or intimidated in public. Labour should be invited to give examples of where they have arrived at events and been met by screaming mobs of Conservative activists? Or to identify any of their supporters who are fearful of the consequences of placing Labour Party posters in their windows. Or to put a figure on the number of times the police have had to be called as a result of criminal damage and intimidation by our members? Can they demonstrate that they are routinely referred to as 'scum' for their political beliefs? There is absolutely no equivalence in the depth and scale of abuse and aggression faced by Labour and Conservatives - and we must not allow Labour to suggest otherwise.

Joy Morrissey

Putting social justice at the heart of British politics

Submission to the Committee for Standards in Public Life, Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates Review

From Dr Ruth Lewis Professor Mike Rowe, and Clare Wiper, Northumbria University

15 September 2017

Online abuse of Parliamentary candidates bears many similarities to online abuse of others engaged in civic life. Findings from our study of online abuse of feminist activists, can inform the Committee's Review by providing information about the nature, patterns, and impacts of this abuse, and the responses to it.

In the context of well-publicised cases of online abuse of high profile women such as Caroline Criado-Perez and Jessica Ennis-Hill, our study, supported by the British Academy, explored the experiences of victims of online misogyny in ways that sought to re-assert the agency of those victims, to explore the nature and impact of the abuse that they received, and to identify the ways in which they responded. We had three distinct motivations. First, there was a glaring lack of robust research into a phenomenon that is much discussed in the media. Second, the focus on online abuse primarily as a form of communication (a 'free speech' issue) overlooks commonalities with other forms of VAWG. Third, accounts from recipients of online abuse which would reveal the experience and impacts of it are absent.

To explore these matters, two data collection strategies were used: a survey and in-depth interviews. An online questionnaire gathered data about the use of social media for feminist debate; experiences of online abuse; the impacts of and responses to abuse, including engagement with formal and informal agencies. Asking about 'general' and specific ('the last incident') experiences of abuse enabled the capture of both the range and specificity of experiences without focusing disproportionately on the most significant experiences which might skew the data towards the 'worst' incidents. The survey gathered data about a range of types of online abuse – harassment and sexual harassment, threats of physical and sexual violence, flaming and trolling, stalking, electronic sabotage, impersonation and defamation – and definitions, drawn from relevant contemporary research were provided for each. To gather rich, detailed information about experiences of abuse, multiple choice and open questions asked about the forms of social media used to communicate abuse; the nature, frequency, duration and volume of abuse; the topics being discussed when the abuse began; what made the communications feel abusive; whether any aspects of identity (such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability) were targeted; how many perpetrators

were involved and whether they were known to the respondent; whether the abuse was linked to offline experiences; the emotional and offline impacts; responses to the abuse; reporting behaviour and satisfaction with responses from others. The open questions generated fulsome responses, creating an extensive qualitative dataset.

227 valid responses were received to the online survey and 17 follow-up interviews were conducted.

Many themes and findings emerged from the study. Of particular relevance to the Committee's work might be the following key outcomes:

1. Abuse was very commonly experienced among our (self-selecting) sample of women who engage in feminist debates online: 88% of those who used Twitter, for example, reported that they had experienced abuse, as had 60% of those who used Facebook as their primary social media platform.
2. There is a continuum of online abuse ranging from concentrated, frequent, highly threatening and hateful to, at the other end of the spectrum, comparatively sporadic and less inflammatory abuse, comprised of unpleasant, non-threatening single messages.
3. Respondents were asked about ten types of abuse, using terms widely used online. Experience of multiple types of abuse were common; only 17% had experienced just a single form. The most commonly experienced categories were 'flaming and trolling' ('someone posted deliberately inflammatory or off-topic material to humiliate and/or provoke a response or emotional reaction'), experienced by 78% of the sample and 'harassment' ('received repeated unsolicited communications and/or violations of privacy') experienced by 67%. The abuse can be sexualised; 40% of the sample experience sexual harassment and 37% experienced threats of sexual violence. The least common forms were 'impersonation' ('my identity was stolen'), and 'electronic sabotage' (such as spamming or viruses sent by someone), each experienced by 9%.
4. In 23% of cases, recipients reported that the online abuse they received had a link, in some way, to abuse in the offline world. This suggests that for a sizeable minority, it is untenable to suggest that online abuse occurs in an environment sealed from reality.
5. The impact of the abuse was on a continuum. A third of respondents agreed with the statement that 'it was just one of those things, I shrugged it off', through 'I was upset and it had a significant impact but I'll get over it' (a third), and 'I keep thinking about it even though I don't want to' (a fifth), to 'it was really traumatic and has affected me badly' (11%)

6. Recipients of online misogynistic abuse did tend to understand their experience as an attempt to 'silence' their participation from public debate on social media. There was a strong sense that perpetrators sought to exclude them from the creative commons of online debate and discussion forums. While harmful consequences should not be minimised, our survey revealed that most women felt in some way 'galvanised' by their experience. Fifty four per cent agreed it made them 'more determined in your political views'. A third (33%) agreed it made them feel motivated to continue to engage in debate. Analysis of impacts shows that, while emotions such as anger, worry, vulnerability, fear and sadness reduce over time, feelings of being galvanised to act increase over time. This challenges the idea that online abuse 'silences' women; while it undoubtedly has that impact for some women at some times, the abuse also galvanised participation in this form of civic life.
7. While offline VAWG is significantly under-reported, our survey suggested relatively high levels of reporting. There may be several reasons for this. The relative ease of reporting online and the availability of documentary evidence, reduce two of the key obstacles to reporting some forms of offline VAWG.
8. Levels of satisfaction with the responses of those consulted vary markedly, with much higher levels of satisfaction with informal than formal contacts. The survey found particularly low rates of satisfaction with ISPs (3% of those who'd reported), Twitter (16%) and Facebook (10%). Satisfaction rates with the police are also low with 44% of those who reported to the police rating their response as unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory and only 1% rating it as satisfactory or very satisfactory.
9. Our research revealed a significant lack of knowledge about perpetrators of abuse: either in terms of their profile or their motivations. Efforts to respond (whether from social media companies, police, communication regulators, policy and law-makers) can only be hampered by this gap and urgent work is needed to address this.

Full details of our research findings can be found in Lewis, R., Rowe, M. and Wiper, C. (2016) 'Online Abuse of Feminists as an Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls', *British Journal of Criminology*, doi: 10.1093/bjc/azw073.

ONLINE ABUSE OF FEMINISTS AS AN EMERGING FORM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

RUTH LEWIS*, MICHAEL ROWE and CLARE WIPER

Abuse directed at visible and audible women demonstrates that cyberspace, once heralded as a new, democratic, public sphere, suffers similar gender inequalities as the offline world. This paper reports findings from a national UK study about experiences of online abuse among women who debate feminist politics. It argues that online abuse is most usefully conceived as a form of abuse or violence against women and girls, rather than as a form of communication. It examines the experiences of those receiving online abuse, thereby making a valuable contribution to existing research which tends to focus on analysis of the communications themselves.

Key words: online abuse, violence against women and girls, feminism, social media

Introduction

Online abuse aimed at women ‘celebrities’ is well covered in mainstream media (Bracchi 2013; McNally 2015) and that directed at women engaged in feminist debate has also received coverage. Early examples include the campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez being subjected to extensive, extreme abuse after calling for women’s representation on banknotes. Professor Mary Beard (2013) blogged about her experiences of online abuse after a TV appearance and reflected on the classical and contemporary ‘cultural awkwardness’ about women’s public voice. Anita Sarkeesian’s experiences of abuse after she criticized the representation of women in video games, and Jessica Ennis-Hill’s after commenting on the case of footballer and (at that time) convicted rapist Ched Evans, are further examples of abuse towards high-profile women. Growing public discussion of the impact of abuse on women’s participation in civic life was exemplified in the Parliamentary launch in 2016 of a cross-party campaign—‘Reclaim the Internet’ (www.reclaimtheinternet.com)—which recalls earlier responses—‘Reclaim the Night’ in the United Kingdom; ‘Reclaim the Streets’ in the United States—to street sexual harassment and violence. Indeed, various organizations (e.g. End Violence Against Women Coalition 2013) have framed concern about online abuse of women in terms of violence against women. Similarly, a working group on Broadband and Gender, chaired by UNDP and UN Women, states that cyber violence against women and girls (VAWG)¹ can have ‘adverse impact on the exercise of and advocacy for free speech and other human rights’ (2015: 2).

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¹We use the term ‘violence against women and girls’ (VAWG), rather than ‘gender-based violence’, because it reveals the gendered nature and direction of this violence and because of its contemporary currency in United Kingdom and international policy contexts. We use the term ‘violence’ to refer to interpersonal physical violence (including sexual), and ‘abuse’ to encompass both this violence and other forms of behaviour which are part of the continuum (Kelly 1987) of behaviours (including sexual harassment, sexual violence, coercive control, intimidation, humiliation and threats) reflecting patriarchal oppression which intersects with other oppressions such as racism, disablism, classism and heteronormativity.

However, much scholarship about online abuse has assumed it is unique to the cyber environment and early scholarship focused on defining and categorizing it as a form of communication, as we discuss below. By contrast, our approach is to explore online abuse of this kind as an extension of offline gender relations which are marked by abuse and VAWG. In this paper, we first explore the recent development of perspectives on online abuse. Three gaps in the extant literature are identified: first, a failure to develop a robust gendered analysis; second, a lack of comparative analysis of online and offline VAWG; and third, a lack of victimological examination of online abuse experienced by women and girls. Following that, we outline our methodology and then present findings relating to the nature and impact of online VAWG and responses to it.

Perspectives on Online Abuse

Since the recognition of online hate and abuse, scholarship has sought to define, explain and understand this growing phenomenon. Problematically, extant research has tended to treat online abuse as separate from ‘real-world’ experiences. [Jane \(2015\)](#) defines the ‘three paradigmatic waves of flaming-related research’ comprised of, firstly, technological determinism (the idea that ‘flaming is the result of the medium’; [Jane 2015: 67](#)), secondly, attempts to define the variously named phenomenon of ‘aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels’ ([O’Sullivan and Flanagin 2003](#)) and, thirdly, a tendency to minimize or overlook the phenomenon. Each of these waves has generated debate, as would be expected in an emerging body of scholarship. They also reflect a broader distinction in the cybercrime literature that separates out offending that could only be committed in an online environment (e.g. many banking frauds or identity theft) from that which might be exacerbated by technology but could be committed offline ([Wall 2008](#)). However, reviewing this work to illuminate online abuse directed at women and, particularly, those engaged in feminist debate online reveals three important and related gaps in the research. First, there is a glaring lack of gendered analysis of a phenomenon that is frequently gendered. Second, the focus on online abuse as a form of communication overlooks commonalities with other forms of VAWG. Third, accounts from recipients of online abuse which would reveal the experience and impacts of it are absent. We discuss each of these shortcomings below.

Firstly, research has rarely foregrounded a gendered analysis of these aggressive communications. While some refer to the sexualized or sexist nature of the content, many scholars have not acknowledged—let alone prioritized—this aspect. In mitigation, the sexualized and sexist nature of abusive communications need not always be the focus. Indeed, given the diversity of terms for the phenomenon being investigated—‘flaming’ ([Lea et al. 1992](#)), ‘trolling’ ([Donath 1999](#)), ‘provocation’ ([McCosker 2013](#)), ‘invective’ ([Vrooman 2002](#)), ‘cyber hate’ and ‘hate speech’ ([Citron and Norton 2011](#)), ‘ebile’ and ‘gendered vitriol’ ([Jane 2014b](#))—there is a need to set parameters around the phenomenon. However, for an investigation of gendered online abuse against women and girls, it is important to move beyond a focus on definitions and a tendency to group together diverse forms of hostile communication, without acknowledging specific features of misogynistic communication that require distinctive classification and explanation. [O’Sullivan and Flanagin \(2003: 80\)](#) begin to move away from this monolithic approach. They offer the ‘interactional norm cube’ to identify ‘the possible combinations of

message interpretations, as a function of various message sender/receiver and third-party viewpoints, and as informed by normative cues'. This highlights that flaming is varied, contextual and relational, distinguishes it from other forms of harassment and hate speech, and provides a platform for understanding sexualized and misogynistic abuse.

Definitional work is not alone in failing to incorporate gendered analysis; Lee's (2005) analysis of responses to flaming neglects a gender awareness, even when presenting data which demonstrate the gendered nature of the flaming. He presents extracts from a discussion forum which include the terms 'bitch', 'dumb broad', 'ignorant little slut' but defines these simply as 'name-calling' without recognizing inherently gendered and sexist features. Claims that 'provocation... extends the public that forms' around news events (McCosker 2013: 215) and that flaming can be seen as productive form of conflict which 'sometimes plays an important role in demarcating group boundaries' (Lee 2005: 392) seems of limited value when analysing explicitly sexist, sexualized, threatening and violent behaviour directed at women online which may in fact *restrict* women's civic engagement (see, e.g., Citron and Norton 2011). An exception to this lacuna is Williams's (2006) analysis of hate speech and sexual abuse within the online community *Second Life*. While not directly comparable to the online abuse analysed in this paper (because, e.g., the cyberworld he analyses is an environment in which users adopt holistic virtual identities), Williams usefully critiques the Internet as a site of social and cultural reproduction that reflects real-world patterns. Equally valuable, in relation to the discussion further below, is Williams' analysis of how such environments provide routes of resistance to abuse as well as a conduit for offensive behaviour.

Some scholarship pays attention to gendered dimensions of online abuse. Herring was perhaps the first to recognize the gendered nature of much online abuse and examines gendered differences in styles of communication (2004), as well as feminist responses to 'trolling' (2002). Jane (2014a) focuses explicitly on 'ebile' directed at women online, arguing that this receives considerable media coverage but little scholarly attention. Citron and Norton (2011) argue that the gendered nature of online abuse compromises women's 'digital citizenship' and is a civil rights violation (Citron 2009). This echoes work noting that racist hate crime attempts territorial exclusivity and the delegitimization of minority communities in some geographical areas (Bowling 1998). Halder and Jaishankar (2009: 2011) argue that part of the logic of victimization of women on social networking sites is to exclude certain voices from cyberspace. Megarry (2014) argues that online abuse polices women's voices, thereby limiting their use of online fora for feminist activism. Focusing on the 'performance' of online abuse, Vrooman (2002: 64) examines communications on alt.flame as 'resolutely masculinist displays of the prowess and skill of a chosen identity, an aspect of masculine display'. As we argue below in relation to our data, recipients of such communication often identify it as an exclusionary attempt to delegitimize their online presence although it is frequently counterproductive since their resolve to political engagement can be strengthened as a result. This indicates how our survey of 'victim' impact and responses reshapes understanding of general online abuse.

The second problem we observe in much scholarship is its conceptualization of online abuse as distinct from real-world contexts. The technologically deterministic approach exemplifies this, seeing aggressive communications as resulting from the technology used, allowing as it does anonymity and unaccountability in a disinhibiting

environment. Such work has been the subject of thorough empirical and theoretical critique, including its failure to recognize the wider social context of gendered norms and sexist behaviours (Vrooman 2002). Others have noted this failure to contextualize online abuse as an extension of offline behaviour. For example, with reference to the #mencallmethings hashtag, Megarry (2014: 47) argues online harassment ‘should be conceptualised as online sexual harassment and a form of excluding women’s voices from the digital public sphere’. However, if online abuse is to be seen as an extension of real-world behaviour, then it might follow that those who are *not* misogynistic offline are unlikely to become so online simply because they are in an uninhibited environment, as a technologically determinist position might imply. Or ‘[i]n other words, people are jerks not only when they are in anonymous Internet spaces, but also when they are in spaces where they can get away with being jerks’ (Shaw 2014: 274). Claims that the Internet is inherently criminogenic are critiqued by Wall (2008: 49) who rejects assumptions that cyberspace ‘corrupts normally law-abiding individuals who go on a moral holiday when on the Internet’. Moreover, the focus on online abuse as a form of communication minimizes its significance as ‘just’ words. The ‘real’ and the virtual are not separate experiential realms; activities that take place in the virtual world are still experienced as reality, with material consequences. Proper understanding of these experiences requires that we move beyond analysis of texts to engagement with those who receive them, an approach we adopt in the analysis below.

Although recent studies usefully examine the text used in online abuse, the third shortcoming we note is the failure to consider experiences of *receiving* online abuse. Jane (2014a) insists that we do not censor the ‘unspeakable’ e bile to protect the sensibilities of readers; excising harsh or offensive language, she argues, contributes to a ‘tyranny of silence’ which benefits perpetrators (2014b: 533). We support Jane’s insistence (2014a: 81) that e bile ‘must be spoken in its unexpurgated entirety’ to document and understand the phenomenon. However, analysis needs to go further and consider the experience of *receiving* such online abuse. Without analysing recipients’ experiences, claims that, e.g., online abuse ‘silences women’ remain unsupported by empirical evidence. Textual analysis is valuable but limited since without examination of recipients’ experiences we lose their interpretations, relying instead on researchers’ own analysis. Thus, we cannot explore how the experience of abuse intersects with other aspects of life and identity, and we do not learn how such experiences are incorporated—or not—into daily activities, and political engagement, online and offline. Considering the perspectives of recipients asserts their agency and capacity to respond to abuse and challenges not only perpetrators but also the conceptual and ideological context that underpins offensive behaviour. In common with wider victimological perspectives, we emphasize that recipients of online abuse retain the capacity to respond in a range of ways that cannot simply be ‘read’ from the content of the abuse. The diversity of responses to online abuse is further elaborated below.

As outlined above, given that it has now been established that there are forms of abusive, threatening and violent online communication towards women, we focus specifically on that phenomenon directed at women who engage in feminist debate online. Anecdotal evidence indicates that online feminism attracts both shocking levels of threats and violence but also more routine, even mundane levels of sexism, prejudice and misogyny. Rather than treating it as a form of communication, we locate it in wider forms of behaviours which constitute VAWG. This approach enables us to learn

from examination of and theorizing about VAWG, to better understand the social role of online abuse of feminists and its impacts. In doing this, we contribute not only to knowledge about patterns and impacts of victimization but also to development of criminological analysis of offending and harm experienced online. While there is clearly a growing body of work exploring the extent and techniques of online crime, there remains relatively little empirical or theoretical insight into the nature and impact of such offending, including its impact on engagement in political movements.

The next section of the paper outlines our methodology. Then, analysis is presented of the *nature* of gendered abuse online, its *impacts* on recipients and the various *responses* developed. In the conclusion, we consider the extent to which existing knowledge of VAWG in real-world contexts can be applied to this emerging field.

Methodology

There are several reasons for this study's focus on women who engage in feminist debate. Feminist civic engagement is flourishing and of growing academic interest (Dean and Aune 2015; Lewis and Marine 2015). Online activity has been significant in the resurgence of feminist communities, debates and theories. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women espousing feminist views are particularly targeted for abuse online. This cohort therefore provides a starting point for further research about online abuse, gendered and otherwise. We do not claim that their perspectives or experiences can be extrapolated more widely. However, given their interpretations and perspectives, those who engage in feminism online may offer useful insight into their experiences, given the centrality of VAWG in feminist politics. Finally, a particular aim of the research was to explore how those abused online respond to the abuse and whether this constitutes a form of activism.

To explore these matters, two data collection strategies were used: a survey and in-depth interviews. An online questionnaire (conducted June–October 2015) contained multiple-choice and open questions about: the use of social media for feminist debate; the nature, frequency, duration and volume of abuse; forms of social media used to communicate abuse; the topics being discussed when abuse began; what made the communications feel abusive; whether any aspects of identity (such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability) were targeted; how many perpetrators were involved and whether they were known to the respondent; whether the abuse was linked to offline experiences; the emotional and offline impacts; responses to the abuse; reporting behaviour and satisfaction with responses from others. Data were gathered about a range of online abuse—harassment and sexual harassment, threats of physical and sexual violence, flaming and trolling, stalking, electronic sabotage, impersonation and defamation—and definitions, drawn from relevant contemporary research, were provided for each. Asking about 'general' and specific ('the last incident') experiences captured the range and specificity of abuse without focusing disproportionately on experiences which might skew the data towards the 'worst' incidents. Responses indicate that abuse can be experienced over extended periods, so an individual 'incident' can consist of a single communication or of many, over weeks or months. The open questions generated fulsome responses, creating an extensive qualitative data set.

A sample was created for the survey by inviting personal/professional contacts to complete the questionnaire and promote it among relevant networks. Initial contacts included about 60 women's organizations, approximately 30 individual feminists,

including journalists, activists and academics, and five organizers of feminist events concurrent with the research. This approach enabled snowball sampling, reducing the impact of initial selection bias and reaching a greater number and range of participants. To further reduce bias, we paid attention to the type of politics and topics supported by the individuals and organizations contacted; e.g., we made sure not to invite only those supporting radical feminism, or only those focusing on violence against women, but also local, regional, and national networks of Black women, religious women, service providers and activists. For several reasons, the research was not explicitly promoted to high-profile feminists, although, due to anonymity of respondents, we do not know whether such respondents did participate. We were aware that some high-profile feminists are subjected to extreme levels of abuse which may not be typical. Many of these high-profile feminists are regularly trolled, and so we risked the questionnaire being sabotaged through trolling or cyberattacks. These concerns about security were central to designing the methodology; the questionnaire was hosted on SurveyMonkey which was deemed to provide sufficient data security and some protection against sabotage by preventing more than one response per IP address. These strategies proved effective; only 14 responses were deemed to be inauthentic (so identified because they included irrelevant, extensive text and/or sexualized responses).

In total, 226 valid responses were received. For this analysis, respondents who self-identified as men ($n = 9$) were screened out of the data set, so only those who identified as women were included.² It was not possible to verify the credentials reported and, in common with other online surveys, we have to rely on the integrity of respondents' reports. The characteristics of the final sample are outlined in [Table 1](#).

The second data collection strategy was a set of 17 in-depth interviews exploring emergent themes from the survey data, particularly responses to and impacts of abuse. Interview volunteers were recruited through the survey and further snowballing. Their demographic characteristics are presented in [Table 2](#). Interviews were conducted via Skype, telephone or in person, typically lasted about an hour, and were recorded and transcribed.

Qualitative survey and interview data were analysed thematically, through collaborative processes of reading and rereading the data, discussing emerging themes and then coding the data. The study has benefitted from the exceptional richness of data provided by respondents. Unedited data are presented below in line with [Jane's \(2014a\)](#) call for unexpurgated documentation, to break the tyranny of silence around cyber violence against women.

The quantitative analysis distinguishes between levels of online activity as a proxy measure for levels of engagement in online feminism. Use of social media to discuss feminism ranged from less than one hour a day (85 respondents)—the group we call 'low users'; 1–2 hours per day (73 respondents)—'moderate users'; to 3 or more hours a day (68)—'high users', which included 50 respondents who were intensely engaged, discussing feminism online for 6 or more hours a day. As this was not a random sample, inferential statistics such as chi-square could not be used to generalize to the wider population, so bivariate relationships between variables are examined only to establish patterns within this sample.

²The low number of men who responded to this survey prevents comparison of women and men's experiences of online abuse; this would be a valuable topic for further research.

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TABLE 1 *Survey respondents' demographic characteristics (n = 226)*

	<i>n</i>	%
Race/ethnicity		
White	182	88
Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi, Chinese)	7	3
Black (African, Caribbean)	6	3
Mixed	6	3
Other	7	3
Age (years)		
18–25	40	18
26–35	64	28
36–45	64	28
46–55	41	18
56+	17	8
Location		
Northern England	53	23
Central England	55	24
Southern England	89	39
Scotland	15	7
Wales	9	4
Northern Ireland	5	2
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	111	54
Bisexual	50	24
Lesbian	34	17
Other	10	5

TABLE 2 *Interview respondents' demographic characteristics (n = 17^a)*

	<i>n</i>	%
Race/ethnicity		
White	12	75
Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi, Chinese)	1	6
Black (African, Caribbean)	2	13
Other	1	6
Location		
Northern England	4	23
Central England	1	6
Southern England	11	65
Scotland	1	6
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	7	54
Bisexual	3	23
Lesbian	2	15
Other	1	8

^aSome respondents declined to provide some demographic characteristics.

Findings

The following three sections present qualitative and quantitative data about the nature of the abuse, its impacts, and social and legal responses to it. This leads to a conclusion that considers the findings in terms of what is known about VAWG more generally. We argue that online abuse of feminists is best understood, analysed and theorized as a form of VAWG.

The nature of the online abuse

In an effort to understand the context of online abuse, respondents were asked about their online activity. The most commonly used social media for feminist debate was Twitter (80 per cent of the sample), followed by Facebook (74 per cent of the sample) and blogs (35 per cent). Other forms (e.g. email, news sites, private/invite-only fora) were less commonly used. Respondents experienced most abuse on Twitter; some respondents reporting that abuse started when they began to use Twitter. Eighty-eight per cent of those who use Twitter regularly for feminist debate had been abused on it, compared with 60 per cent of Facebook regular users, 46 per cent of blogs regular users and 29 per cent of news sites users. The greater frequency of abuse on Twitter might be due to the open access of this social media relative to others. Given the popularity of Twitter, the specific aspects of this platform as a site for abusive communications are worthy of further consideration.

The data show that there is no single pattern of experiences of online abuse. Rather, there is a continuum of online abuse ranging from concentrated, frequent, highly threatening and hateful to, at the other end of the spectrum, comparatively sporadic and less inflammatory, unpleasant, non-threatening messages. To some extent, this reflects wider experiences of victimization, including VAWG (Kelly 1987) and some forms of hate crime. These include extreme incidents but also routine low-level offending, which might have a significant impact for the very reason that it becomes normalized and persistent (Bowling 1998; Chakraborti and Garland 2009).

As might be expected, 'high users' are exposed to more abuse with a third (35 per cent) of this group reported 'constant' abuse. However, this level of abuse was also a feature for others, with 24 per cent of moderate users and 16 per cent of low users receiving 'constant' abuse. Only 7 per cent of the sample reported that they experienced it less than once a year. Respondents were asked about ten types of abuse, using terms widely used online.³ Experience of multiple types was common; only 17 per cent had experienced a single form and a quarter of high users had experienced eight or more types (compared with 7 per cent of moderate and 6 per cent of low users). Figure 1 indicates that high users experience greater levels of abuse across all ten types. However, the difference in their experience was more marked in relation to some types (physical threats, sexual harassment, incitement to abuse, sexual threats, stalking, electronic sabotage and impersonation) than others (flaming and trolling, harassment, and defamation). The current data set does not enable explanation of these differences in experiences of type and incidence of abuse, but they are worthy of further study.

³Harassment: repeated unsolicited communications and/or violations of privacy

Sexual harassment: repeated unsolicited communications of a sexual nature, including unwanted sexual images

Threats of physical violence

Threats of sexual violence

Stalking: someone sought and compiled information about you and used it to harass, threaten and/or intimidate you

Flaming & Trolling: posting deliberately inflammatory or off-topic material to humiliate and/or provoke a response or emotional reaction from you

Electronic sabotage: e.g. spamming or viruses sent by someone

Impersonation: your identity was stolen

Defamation: hostile misinformation and false messages were posted about you

Inciting others to abuse or threaten you

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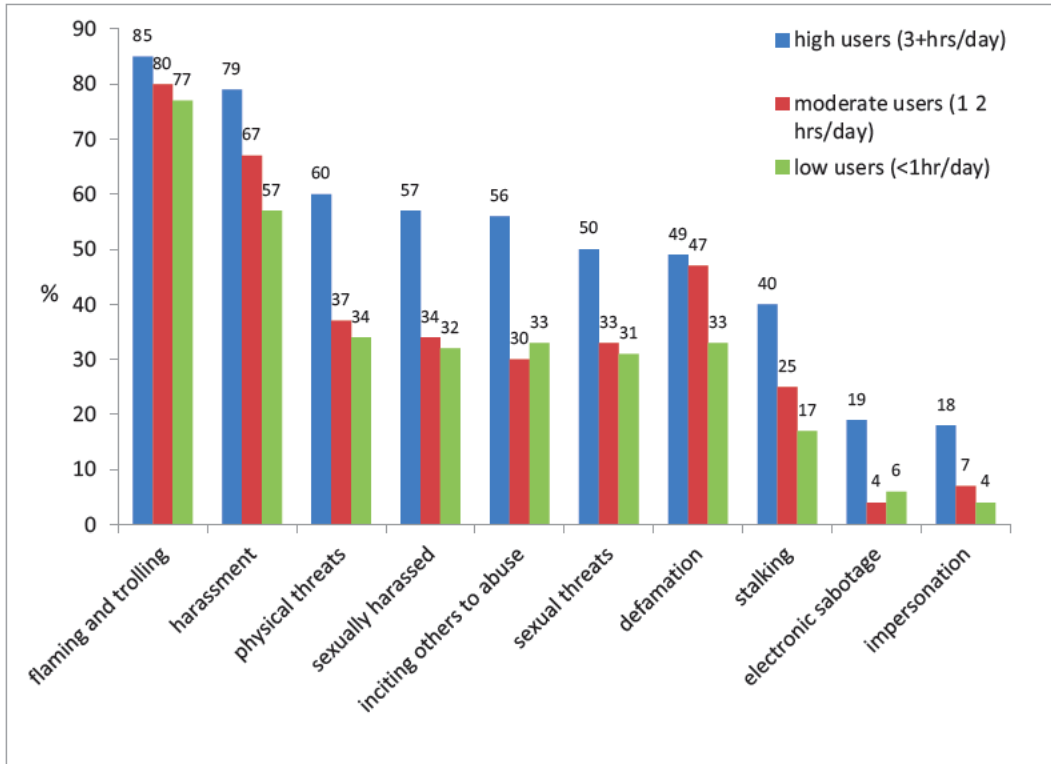


FIG. 1 Types of abuse 'ever' experienced.

At one end of the continuum, threats to rape and to kill were commonly reported. Three responses to the question inviting open text details of the most recent incident illustrate the more extreme forms of abuse:

I was told I deserved to die a painful death. (Respondent 74⁴)

I sent out a tweet saying 'Guns are not the issue, racism is' and one male sent me a message of abuse (can't remember exactly because I reported and blocked) saying along the lines: 'You fucking spaz feminazi would shoot you in the head if I could then you wouldn't give a fuck about gunlaws'. (Respondent 54)

Threat to kill me and my son. (Respondent 196)

Not all experiences of abuse were so threatening. Examples of the other end of the continuum include:

Hostile violent comments (not threats towards me). (Respondent 189)

Told to shut up, sworn at etc. (Respondent 15)

Abusive language in private mails and on topic threads. (Respondent 92)

Although these comments suggest some experiences are more mundane, this does not imply that they were experienced as less impactful or harmful. The experience of abuse is extremely subjective, making it difficult to create reliable scales of severity. Instead of developing hierarchical scales, we rely instead on the idea of a continuum and on respondents' reports of their reactions to and the impacts of abuse, as we discuss in the following section.

⁴Survey data are identified as 'Respondent n'; interview data are identified as 'Interviewee n'.

Media coverage of online abuse has highlighted the sexualized nature of much abuse of women. Our data show that 40 per cent of the sample experienced sexual harassment and 37 per cent experienced threats of sexual violence; high users were more likely to have experienced these (see [Figure 1](#)). These included rape threats, as further open text survey responses illustrate:

I was sent messages on a daily basis, sometimes several times a day, on a number of platforms telling me that I was a slut and a whore, that I'm not a real lesbian because I've 'had sex' with men, despite the fact that my only experience with and around men is as a trafficking survivor. I was called a 'cum-whore', a 'bi-slut'; I was told I deserved my rapes, I was told it was 'regret not rape'. I was told that I 'enjoyed it', I was told that a must have just been a horny kid (I was trafficked from the age of 5), I was told that dykes don't like dick so I can't be a lesbian. I was told to kill myself, I was threatened with rape, I was told I like cock, I was told I loved the taste of semen. (Respondent 198)

I was Tweeting about #EverydaySexism and received emails from several men detailing how they were going to sexually abuse me to remind me who was in control in society. (Respondent 103)

I was abused for discussing breast feeding in public! Told that I should never breed, that he should be able to wank off next to my kids and have sex next to me and my kids on a bus! Called disgusting and a disgrace to women. (Respondent 127)

Some received images as well as written abuse; high users were more likely to receive these (33 per cent, compared to 24 per cent of moderate and 22 per cent of low users). Many of these were sexualized, including respondent's own image incorporated into pornographic content:

My image was photo-shopped on to various other images and posted to everyone in my uni class. (Respondent 90)

Following my tweet about a feminist event, I received a tweet the next day, of three photographs from an unknown sender. The photographs were of a white, older, long-haired unknown naked male, bending over and stretching his hugely gaping anus open to the camera (and so, to me as the viewer), with a really horrible distorted/angry expression on his face. (Respondent 165)

Media coverage of this topic tends to focus on cases where recipients receive huge volumes of online abuse. While most of our respondents had not experienced mass abuse, a minority reported very high volumes from a large number of perpetrators (6 per cent reported there were 50 or perpetrators in their last incident):

I took a picture of a pink office supply item advertised as 'for women' and made a sarcastic comment about how now women can work too and tagged #everydaysexism in an attempt to point out even these little things are still a representation of sexism. This was immediately shared by GamerGate all over Twitter, Reddit, and various other sites. Within a few hours it had over 25,000 views and 650 abusive comments on Reddit not including the comments on Twitter. My picture, name, twitter handle, location, profession, were all shared. I feared for my online security as Gamergate is known to hack people's accounts. It took days before I could get moderators to remove my personal information that was shared across sites. I was threatened with rape, abuse, etc. (Respondent 126)

I said something about women in science (I am a chemist). I got a barrage of abuse targeting both me and my daughter (not my sons, whose photos are also on my feed - they were never mentioned) - it was mostly variations of 'fuck off back to the kitchen' It went on for months and every time it started up again men would encourage others to join in. (Respondent 31)

One person ‘set’ their 10k followers on me for talking about radical feminism. I was told to ‘get raped’ ‘Die in a fire’ & that I needed ‘exorcised’ to name but a few. (Respondent 130)

Although these high-volume attacks were often relatively short-lived, they could be sustained in a manner that makes them akin to harassment. Examples include:

It was defamatory and aimed at getting me fired. It was also relentless from a person I have blocked. Felt invasive and intrusive - they are monitoring me even though I’ve blocked them. (Respondent 67)
The most recent is the most ongoing. He sets up accounts to start discussions under pseudonyms so he can abuse me, incites other people to abuse me, emails to tell me he is watching me (he largely isn’t its only online activity he sees now). It has decreased in frequency and is only occasional now. (Respondent 116)

At the other end of the continuum, for 47 per cent of respondents the last incident was comprised of fewer than ten abusive communications. Low users were most likely to receive a single communication (51 per cent compared with 44 per cent of moderate and 31 per cent of high users):

I had retweeted some stories about the street harassment of women. A stranger tweeted at me a couple of times saying I was only concerned about this issue because it would never happen to me as I was ugly and obviously frigid etc (w specific reference to my twitter profile photo). (Respondent 176)
I linked to an old Spectator article in which Boris Johnson wrote that the problem with the UK was that British men could not ‘control’ their women (the context was pregnancy/reproduction). I tweeted it out drawing attention to its repugnant message, and how it was at variant with Johnson’s image as a good-natured clown. Most of the responses were positive/discursive but one was extremely personal, telling me to ‘fuck off you crazy feminist c*nt’ or something along those lines. (Respondent 6)

In response to a comment I made about male violence I received a tweet from a man who made sexual insults and suggested that my position on male violence was because, as a feminist, I wasn’t getting enough sexual attention from men (phrased in an abusive and sexually graphic way). (Respondent 57)

These extracts illustrate considerable diversity in the duration and volume of abuse. The same can be said about the perceived characteristics of perpetrators. As far as respondents could ascertain, most commonly there were one or two perpetrators (49 per cent) and the incident lasted for one day (44 per cent). In contrasting intensity, 31 per cent received 10–50 communications in the last incident, for 35 per cent the incident lasted about a week and for 33 per cent there were 3–10 perpetrators. Respondents were not asked about the gender of abusers because it is not possible to reliably ascertain this online. Many intimated that abusers were male but it is possible that some may have adopted male online personas; indeed, one of the first people in the United Kingdom convicted of sending abusive tweets was a woman who included references to rape as well as threats to kills (see [R v John Raymond Nimmo and Isabella Kate Sorley 2014](#)). This indicates that online abusers may adopt the discourse of misogyny regardless of their gender. This is not ‘male violence’ so much as ‘masculinized violence’; i.e., violence that is generally perpetrated by men against women and girls, but may be perpetrated by women, and which draws on and generates misogynistic discourses. The finding of recent research by [Demos \(2016\)](#), that half of those sending abusive tweets containing the words ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ were women, was emphasized in many press reports of the research, indicating ignorance that misogynistic terms have been incorporated into public discourse.

For 61 per cent of respondents, the perpetrators were thought to be strangers, while for a third, the perpetrators were members of their online community or a known persona. A fifth reported that the abuse was sent by a 'well-known' troll.⁵ In 77 per cent of cases there was no link to offline abuse; however, 23 per cent reported that their experience of online abuse was somehow linked to 'real-world' abuse. Respondents reported those experiences as particularly impactful:

he named the train station local to me in an oblique way. Later on the same forum he had a conversation with himself about making a special visit to a particular person (me) & named the station he'd be catching the train to. This man is a known rapist...He specified his visit would take place over the w/e. The police advised me not to stay alone at my home - or, if I did, to phone them if I heard any odd noises. I live alone so of course it unnerved me. I consider myself to be strong & independent, but he managed to intimidate and frighten me. (Respondent 85)

I started a girl only group at a secondary school to discuss issues affecting young women. The fact that it was girl only meant a group of five boys took exception and began to Tweet about me and post defamatory messages on Facebook. This was all amongst students (I'm a teacher) and I did not see them until students showed me them on their phones. Ultimately, the campaign led to me leaving teaching. (Respondent 132)

For some of the respondents, the sexism or misogyny in the online abuse intersected with other forms of oppression, such as racism and homophobia:

We are talking about the conscious and the unconscious here. It was not precisely obvious that I am a working class Jewish woman, but bullies find it very easy to sniff out people who might be vulnerable to attack - or else they felt threatened by me, so they had to take me out. (Respondent 163)

I had used a hashtag when discussing a recent news event and started to receive hostile or derailing tweets from racist and anti-feminist users who appeared to be monitoring the hashtag in order to prevent feminists having an uninterrupted discussion with each other. (Respondent 115)

I was quoted in a press article speaking out about violence against women. the Facebook newspaper page included (not anon individuals) comments like 'she needs a good kicking in the cunt'..she's a man hating lesbian and needs a good fucking to sort her out '..someone should shut her up by sticking a cock in her mouth'..'why doesn't someone kick the shit out of that ugly bitch'...I could go on and on giving examples of the abuse posted. (Respondent 94)

These data show the nature, duration, volume and frequency of online abuse. We now turn to the under-researched issue of the impact on recipients.

Impacts of online abuse

For the majority, receiving abusive messages was significant. In relation to the last incident, only 7 per cent reported they were 'not bothered'. Again, there was a continuum of responses from 'it was just one of those things, I shrugged it off' (39 per cent of the sample), 'I was upset and it had a significant impact but I'll get over it' (36 per cent), to 'it was really traumatic and I keep thinking about it even though I don't want to' (26 per cent). For some, the sense that it was 'just one of those things' points to the normalization of online abuse. It has become a part of everyday online life and some respond

⁵These options do not total 100 per cent because respondents were asked to select up to three categories which best described the identity/ies of the perpetrator/s.

by working to ‘manage’ their emotional reactions to minimize the harm done by it. The following demonstrates the kind of ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild 1979) involved in being able to ‘shrug it off’:

It’s something I experience quite often, and just for being a feminist. On an almost daily basis I have to deal with messages from men, many of which contain pictures or content that’s sexual and unwanted. It upsets me greatly but I’ve gotten used to it and I can’t afford to let it upset me. (Respondent 9)

Another strategy to manage impact is to compare one’s own experience to others’. Commonly respondents minimized their own experiences in light of others, sometimes blaming themselves for using social media incautiously. Perhaps significantly, there were no instances of respondents emphasizing the magnitude of their own experiences in light of others. For example:

It happens to all women so it’s almost not worth mentioning as it’s so unremarkable. (Respondent 201)
 It was a much more minor incident than the sustained harassment (in some cases from users with offline positions of power) that friends of mine have received - relatively speaking it did not matter that much. (Respondent 115)

This ‘normalization’ occurred even in response to death and rape threats, which might reasonably be judged as very serious. Given that some had received voluminous abusive messages, detailing threats of physical and sexual violence, a ‘simple’ abusive message may, in comparison, be experienced as relatively mild. ‘Normalization’ can be an effective strategy for dealing with online abuse but raises significant concerns about the longer-term, insidious harm of considering death and rape threats as ‘normal’. The accumulative effect of routine, everyday abusive encounters can be highly significant. Indeed, respondents who experienced it more often (‘most weeks or constantly’) were more likely to experience stronger reactions, as shown in Table 3. The majority (64 per cent) of those who found it ‘really traumatic’, received abuse ‘constantly’ or ‘most weeks’, while the majority (71 per cent) of those who ‘shrugged it off’ received it once a month or less often. While some women interviewed stated that the frequency of online abuse *lessened* its impact, the survey data indicate that, in general, more frequent abuse increased impact. This indicates that far from becoming diluted by its frequency, the effects of the ‘wallpaper of sexism’ (Lewis *et al.* 2015) are cumulative and exacerbated. Again, there is a parallel with the normalization thesis whereby offline VAWG leads survivors to downplay their experiences because they are part of the ordinary and mundane routine of everyday life.

TABLE 3 *Frequency of abuse and reaction to it*

Frequency of abuse	Reaction to last incident of abuse					
	‘I shrugged it off’		‘Upset but I’ll get over it’		‘Really traumatic, I keep thinking about it’	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
‘Constantly’ or most weeks	21	30	55	26	30	64
Once a month	17	24	10	15	5	11
Less than once a month	33	47	20	30	12	26

As indicated above, some respondents reported the abuse had serious impacts. Some referred to ‘triggering’ (Lewis *et al.* 2015) whereby reactions to other abusive experiences are relived. Triggering occurred when women had previous offline experiences of abuse, for example:

Exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions. Particularly PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] related to past sexual violence. (Respondent 79)

Depression and anxiety, triggering of past experiences of real-life abuse, increased mistrust of people. (Respondent 69)

More routine impacts of receiving abusive messages included emotional and physical effects. Forty-two per cent of respondents reported they were ‘worried’ after the last incident and ‘stress’ and ‘anxiety’ were frequently reported. For example, one respondent reported she felt ‘stress, fear, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, anger’. For some, the impacts manifested physically, but mental health consequences were also identified, as the following comments illustrate:

I ended up being prescribed beta blockers in the short term as I would wake up in the night with palpitations. (Respondent 85)

I have severe ME. My energy is very limited, and simply talking about the weather online is tiring. Talking about feminist issues is something I have to ration or the energy output makes me iller. A mass of abuse for it made me substantially more sick, and it took around 2–3 months before I was back to a useful level of ‘health’ again. (Respondent 83)

While harmful consequences should not be minimized, many respondents felt in some way ‘galvanized’ by their experience. Fifty-four per cent agreed it made them ‘more determined in your political views’. A third (33 per cent) agreed it made them feel ‘motivated to continue to engage in debate’ and ‘motivated to do something’ (34 per cent). Analysis of impacts shows that, while emotions such as anger, worry, vulnerability, fear and sadness reduce over time, feelings of being galvanized to act increase over time. This complicates the claim that online abuse ‘silences’ women; while it undoubtedly has that impact for some women at some times, abuse also galvanizes participation in this form of civic life. We discuss this further in the following section.

Personal, social and legal responses to online abuse

Just as the nature and impact of online abuse varied, so too women who receive abuse respond in a variety of ways. This section explores practical and political responses to online abuse.

In contrast to offline VAWG, our survey suggested relatively high levels of reporting, detailed in Table 4. While 30 per cent said they did not report the last incident to anyone, 70 per cent talked to informal contacts (friends, family, online contacts and colleagues) and nearly half (43 per cent) to formal contacts (police, Internet service provider (ISP), Twitter, Facebook). There may be several reasons for this. The relative ease of reporting online and the availability of documentary evidence reduce two of the key obstacles to reporting some forms of offline VAWG. Rates might also be higher among this group because the sample was comprised of respondents attuned to feminist politics and so perhaps more inclined to report.

ONLINE ABUSE OF FEMINISTS

TABLE 4 *Reporting of 'last incident'*

	Contacted for support		Satisfied with response	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Informal contacts				
Friends	131	58	104	79
Online contacts	91	40	68	75
Family	86	38	46	53
Colleagues	50	22	23	46
Formal contacts				
Facebook ^a	41	62	4	10
Twitter ^a	84	54	14	29
Police	44	19	7	16
ISP	37	16	1	3

^aPercentages for Facebook and Twitter are calculated from the population of those abused on this form of social media.

Levels of satisfaction with the responses of those consulted vary markedly, with much more satisfaction with informal than formal contacts. The survey found particularly low rates of satisfaction with ISPs (3 per cent of those who'd reported) and Facebook (10 per cent). Satisfaction rates with the police were also low at 16 per cent which compares badly to general levels of victim satisfaction with the police. Data compiled by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary ([HMIC undated](#)) show overall satisfaction with police among crime victims was 84 per cent in England and Wales in 2014. Reasons for dissatisfaction with the police response included perceived indifference to online abuse, responses that echo criticisms of responses to VAWG offline. Some concerns mirrored wider challenges in terms of policing cyberspace. The interviewees quoted below noted officers were uncertain about the legal and organizational capacity to respond:

My local police, it's not their fault, it's genuinely not their fault, some of them are lovely people, but they don't have any idea how to deal with it, so they say things like 'have you upset anyone recently?' and I'm like, 'yeah, well it's my job'... And then they say things like, 'have you thought about you know changing your Twitter handle?' or, you know, like 'can you not just block these people?' or things like this. (Interview 10)

It's really difficult to do anything because they always say, it's, you know, not really a threat. I don't know what the actual law is at the moment because I know they're having quite a few changes but I think the police tend to think until something actually happens they can't do anything so they will monitor it but they will actually wait for him to actually go and harm someone before they do anything. (Interview 11)

One explanation for the low rates of reporting offline abuse is a sense of shame or stigma, and the belief that such victimization is a private matter to be dealt with alone rather than a concern for social or legal agencies. By contrast, women experiencing online abuse seem less likely to invoke notions of shame and stigma; 14 per cent reported embarrassment or shame about the last incident and 9 per cent said this preventing them disclosing it. However, a third did not report because they did not believe anyone could do anything about it or would take it seriously.

As well as reporting to others, participants had various ways of responding to the perpetrator/s of the online abuse. A third (34 per cent) confronted the perpetrator/s

online; high, moderate and low users had comparable rates of confronting but this was more likely to be an ongoing rather than one-off exchange for high (65 per cent) than for moderate (45 per cent) and low (48 per cent) users. This suggests that shame and stigma were not strong responses to online victimization. A third (35 per cent) 'used security measures to protect myself' (e.g. blocking contacts or changing security settings); more high users (49 per cent) than moderate (34 per cent) and low (26 per cent) did this. A quarter said they 'discussed the problem online to draw support'; this was more common for high users (34 per cent) than moderate (25 per cent) or low (13 per cent) users, perhaps indicating a stronger activist identity and online support network. A quarter of the sample (26 per cent) reported that they were 'more cautious about how I took part in discussions and/or which topics I discussed', suggesting that, as noted in the literature on cybersecurity and offline crime prevention, recipients felt 'responsibilized' to take measures to prevent recurrence. In circumstances where individuals become responsible for their own security, the role of public agencies becomes reduced, which may result in a deteriorating cycle such that reporting to external agencies comes to be seen as less worthwhile. The focus then shifts towards self-protection rather than the collective need to tackle perpetrators or to create safe spaces for civic engagement (Lee 2007). This 'responsibilization' might be attributed to a neo-liberal influence in discourses around crime. However, it has a longer history in terms of VAWG whereby victims are blamed and held responsible for their own safety.

Discussion

This research has shown that, far from being a form of behaviour unique to the cyber environment, online abuse of feminists shares several features of offline abuse of women. As with real-world VAWG, forms are multiple and varied. Most women experienced multiple types of abuse and almost half experienced it as a routine part of their online lives. In this way, it is experienced as a course of behaviour rather than a set of individual acts. Indeed, women reported their frustration with police responses which treated each individual communication as a discrete act, rather than grasping the harm caused by the accumulation of abuse. This reflects broader concerns that the criminal justice systems fails to conceptualize the cumulative impact of apparently low-level offending, a concern that informed legislation to respond more effectively both to antisocial behaviour and hate crime (Burney 2009; Chakraborti and Garland 2009). Similarly, intimate partner violence has high rates of repeat victimization (Walby *et al.* 2015), although it is often framed and treated, problematically, as discrete acts (Kelly and Westmarland 2016).

As with some forms of VAWG, some online abuse seeks to sexually degrade women. Significant features of online abuse are sexual harassment and threats of sexual violence, experienced as degrading violations, and violent pornographic depictions are also used.

There are similarities too in terms of the perpetrators. VAWG is committed most often by perpetrators 'known to' victims, demonstrating that risks occur not just in public, but also private, familiar and familial spaces. Even in the relatively anonymous online environment, a third of our sample reported that perpetrators were members of their online community. VAWG online and offline is often committed by lone men but harassment in public places, in particular, can have a public, performative

aspect; [Phipps and Young \(2015\)](#) see ‘laddish’ harassment as a form of homosocial bonding. Online abuse is experienced in an ambivalent space that is simultaneously private and public. Social media may offer forms of private space whereby interaction is performed only in front of those ‘followed’ or ‘befriended’ rather than to a wider public. However, it is easily recirculated and might be considered public in the sense that it is shared, even if only among invited contacts. In terms of the content, many respondents suggested perpetrators intended their messages to have communicative action that served to exclude targets from online spaces often conceived as ‘creative commons’, a place in which cultural, social and political exchanges occur. There is a ‘performative’ aspect to online abuse; the motivation and impact may be not only to demean or exclude the individual victim, but thereby to build up the identity and status of the communicator. The experience of receiving abuse may be individual, private and solitary, even while the communication of abuse is public, social and performative.

Online abuse, like offline VAWG, has significant impacts. While both are ‘normalized’ in wider discourses in ways which support dominant heteronormativity and gender relations ([Hlavka 2014](#)), this does not undo the harm caused. At the most extreme, both can lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (see [Pain’s \(2015\)](#) comparison of intimate partner violence with warfare). The frequency of abuse is a feature of its impact and our analysis suggests that, far from diluting its effects, frequency exacerbates significance. However, it is apparent that, far from being ‘silenced’, some are galvanized by experiencing online abuse and motivated to continue political engagement. This follows in the tradition of VAWG emerging as a social problem largely through the activism of survivors of violence ([Emerson Dobash and Dobash 1992](#)).

As well as similarities, this comparison highlights key differences between online and offline abuse. While offline abuse is characterized by low levels of reporting, our respondents, who may not be typical of online populations, were frequent reporters. In reporting to informal and formal contacts, they challenge patterns of shame, stigma and self-blame and instead involve others in confronting it. While shame is a ‘self-regulating practice ... of male power’ ([Baker 2013: 145](#)), this group of feminists appear to disavow these norms in challenging online abuse.

There may be other distinctive features to the experience of online abuse. [Williams \(2006: 103\)](#) argues that online, where identities are less secure because of their reliance on text, ‘the permanency and visibility of violent narratives online gives a certain longevity’ to the abusive text. Traces of abuse remain, occupying cyberspace and infiltrating online identities and reputations; the tentacles of abuse can be enduring in ways unique to the online environment. There may also be significant differences between the experience of online abuse and the motivation behind it. Perpetrators may be motivated by a transitory sense of entertainment, boredom or ‘humour’ and be unaware that abuse may be experienced as intensely threatening and frightening, with enduring impacts; further research about perpetration of online abuse would reveal more about the motivations and intended effects.

Other future research could usefully focus on strategies to mitigate impacts on individuals and on online social and political activism. To address the question about whether feminists, or women, are at particular risk of abuse, further examination of online abuse in other social movements, in wider civic debate and in popular culture, would be valuable. In light of concerns about apparently deteriorating behaviours in

wider political debate, scholarship could also examine whether/how abusive engagements come to (re)shape social movements and political dialogue. Further research could build on the methodological limitations of this study—the relatively small, self-selected sample group which is appropriate for a purposive study of feminists who use social media, could be complemented by a wider-scale study of gendered and abusive online engagements, and a comparison of women and men’s experiences. As the analysis presented indicates, a difficulty of Internet surveys is that online identities are malleable and it is impossible to verify the credentials of participants. Moreover, as with other victim survey research, the various forms of abuse discussed here are inherently subjective and interpretive; experiences of abuse will be filtered by the wider social and personal characteristics of each individual.

Once heralded as a haven for free speech and democracy, the Internet is also revealed as an extension of offline gendered realities, where violence and abuse is the ‘wallpaper’ (Lewis *et al.* 2015) of everyday life for women and girls. As women and girls challenge patriarchy offline and online, and seek to occupy these spaces on equal terms, we have witnessed a ‘backlash’ against demands for voice and space in civic engagement. Thornton (1995: 318, cited in Lee 2007: 129) argues women are rendered ‘less fit for public sphere responsibilities according to both historical and prevailing democratic norms’; exclusionary intent in online space may be an extension of attempts to exclude women from public spaces, town halls and common spaces of contemporary and historical democracy.

For criminologists, online abuse demands urgent attention. It highlights ways in which abusive, harmful behaviour, some of which is criminal, is part of the process through which gender discourses, and feminist politics, in particular, are contested, negotiated and developed. It demands attention to questions of victimization and regulation. To fully grasp the significance of this phenomenon, we argue it is vital to recognize that online abuse towards feminists, and maybe towards women more generally, bears striking similarities to offline VAWG, notwithstanding some important differences, and so should be considered first and foremost a gendered phenomenon which extends the reach of patriarchal oppression. We also argue that attempts to understand and theorize it are aided by attention to experiences of receiving abuse, as well as to textual analysis of communications. As in other spheres, the impact of offensive speech, abuse and threats are experienced differently by recipients dependent on their wider social circumstances and personal biography. A more thoroughgoing victimology is required to better understand the impact of online abuse and the agency expressed or denied by those subjected to it.

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Introduction

Using data from an online 'victim' survey, this paper provides analysis and commentary in relation to important themes in recent policy and academic debates about hate crime, online abuse, and misogynistic crime. Violence and abuse against women continues to receive an insufficient response from the criminal justice system: both in terms of reacting to existing cases and in terms of prevention. Recent reports from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) (2014, 2015) draw attention to the scale of domestic violence – estimated to generate around 1M calls to the police every year, and accounting for around ten per cent of all recorded crime in England and Wales. In addition to highlighting the scale of domestic abuse, both HMIC reports also note worrying gaps in terms of important concepts such as 'coercive control', now subject to legislative action but poorly understood by police. In January 2017, media reported that the Justice Minister for England and Wales was seeking measures to prevent those accused of domestic violence from directly cross-examining their victims within the family court system. Some months earlier, Nottinghamshire Police announced that they had begun recording misogynistic incidents as hate crimes, a classification subsequently discussed in a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Abuse. In May 2017, North Yorkshire Police became the second force to recognise misogyny as a hate crime. These developments followed a series of reports of high-profile women receiving online abuse following, among other things, their contribution to public debates about the portrayal of women on banknotes and in video games. As well as shifting police approaches, these incidents helped provoke a campaign to 'reclaim the internet', which mirrored feminist 'reclaim the night' protests, and sought to assert the participation of women in public life. Alongside these matters has been a wider debate about legal and criminal justice responses to online abuse of all forms. During a time of tightened resources, the capacity of police to investigate increasing reports of abuse on-line and via social media is limited, and jurisdictional and sectoral challenges apply to forms of offending that are transnational and subject to regulation by large corporations as well as criminal justice systems.

In the discussion below, we focus upon the intersections between these broad topics through an exploration of the gendered abuse of women online. The analysis is based upon a 2015 online survey conducted by the authors and our theoretical focus is on the extent to which this abuse can be considered as a form of hate crime, and whether (if it could be so classified) this would be beneficial

to them as individuals and/or to wider communities, or the public at large. Our argument is that the characteristics of the abuse experienced by respondents to our survey do tend to fit within established definitions of hate crime. However, some elements of prevailing interpretations of hate crime do not fit easily in terms of the experiences reported in our survey: suggesting that the concept of hate crime needs to be re-considered in relation to online experiences. One problematic issue, for example, is that a defining characteristic of hate crime is held to be that such offences include an intention to communicate to wider communities that they are unwelcome, inferior, at risk, and so on. This requires that the offence occurs in the public domain, such that it can 'speak' to the wider public. Our research suggests that considerable abuse was experienced in an online environment in which the distinction between public and private space is complex. If the virtual environment continues to become more significant to the everyday lives of citizens then these difficulties will become more salient and, we argue further below, the concept of hate crime itself needs to be refined.

Each of these themes are developed in greater detail below, following an outline of the extant literature that informs our study, but first an overview of our methodology is presented.

Methodology

This study focused on the online abuse of women who engage in feminist debates. Feminist debate and civic engagement on and offline is flourishing and of growing academic interest (Dean and Aune, 2015; Lewis and Marine, 2015). As more widely, online activity has been increasingly significant in the development and maintenance of feminist communities, debates and theories. Previous work by the authors (REF redacted for review purposes) and wider anecdotal evidence suggested that online debate and discussion was increasingly characterised by high levels of extreme abuse. This study of the experiences of women participating in (broadly defined) feminist debate and campaigning online provides an opportunity to measure the scale of such abuse, and to reflect upon the extent to which it corresponds to forms of hate crime. The experiences of respondents might not reflect those of other groups but their consideration contributes to wider debate about how best to interpret and respond to misogynistic crime.

To explore these matters, two data collection strategies were used: a survey and in-depth interviews. In 2015, an online questionnaire (completed by 227 respondents) gathered data about the use of social media; experiences of online abuse; and the impacts of and responses to abuse, including engagement with formal and informal agencies. Asking about 'general' and specific ('the last incident') experiences of abuse enabled the capture of both the range and specificity of

experiences without focusing disproportionately on the most significant experiences which might skew the data towards the 'worst' incidents. The survey addressed a wide- range of types of online abuse and was not couched in terms of 'hate' or 'bias' crimes. Respondents were asked about harassment and sexual harassment, threats of physical and sexual violence, flaming and trolling, stalking, electronic sabotage, impersonation and defamation. The study was not overly concerned to restrict respondents in terms of types of experience that they reported on. To gather rich, detailed information about experiences of abuse, open questions asked about experiences of abuse; in addition to closed questions about the nature, frequency, duration and volume of abuse. The open questions generated fulsome responses, creating an extensive qualitative dataset and, in terms of empirical data, it is these that are used as evidence in this paper. The second data collection method was a set of 17 in-depth interviews exploring emergent themes from the survey data. Those interviewed were a self-selected group who had participated in the survey or had respond to invitations via social media to participate. The qualitative survey results and interview data were analyzed thematically, through collaborative processes of reading and re-reading the data, discussing emerging themes and then coding the data. The study has benefitted from the exceptional richness of data provided by respondents. In the sections that follow, this data is presented unedited in line with Jane's (2014) call for presenting unexpurgated data to break the tyranny of silence around cyber-violence against women.

Key Features of Hate Crime

Since its development in the US in the early 1970s and the UK a decade or so later, the study of hate crime has demonstrated greater self-reflexivity than some other topics within criminology. A concern to define and demarcate the field might be common to many emerging sub-disciplines as novel theoretical debates, research questions and policy challenges come to be identified among scholars charting new subject matter. The study of hate crime, perhaps more so than other themes, is inherently self-reflexive in the sense that a key concern of researchers, policy-makers, and activists is to recognise that such offences are of symbolic importance and reflect wider patterns of power and prejudice. As such they can only be understood in their specific context and are highly malleable across time and space: the concept of 'hate' is recognised to be highly subjective and as such needs to be subject to on-going examination. As Tatchell (2002) noted, the substantive focus of hate crime legislation (at least in the US and in Britain) reflects the wider development of social movements and the inclusion of different types of prejudice beneath the canopy of hate crime policy reveals wider trends in civil society. Indeed, a critical point raised in the literature is that for a particular 'community of identity' to be brought beneath the legal and symbolic umbrella of hate crime

legislation they must have achieved some recognition and legitimacy. Hierarchies of oppression mean that the most vilified and marginalised might be the most in need of protection but find it the most difficult to garner the political support necessary to secure protected status (Mason, 2014a and 2014b, cited in Schweppe and Walters, 2015). Thus, in both countries, initial hate crime legislation was predominantly focused on racist violence and harassment. Subsequently other communities of identity have come to be recognised and protected, most obviously those victimised on the basis of sexuality and disability. As Gill and Mason-Bish (2013) noted, many activists included in their study argued that the failure to recognise VAWG as a form of hate crime reflects institutional sexism and patriarchal ideology that does not recognise gender-based prejudice.

As is the case with any sociological or criminological subject matter there is not a consistent or wholly accepted set of characteristics that provide for an uncontested definition of hate crime. The analysis of survey and interview data presented later in this paper examines the extent to which the abuse experienced online by feminist activists can be considered a form of hate crime. Further discussion is offered as to whether it would be a politically or socially advantageous to treat VAWG as hate crime, and what the experience of online abuse might mean for conceptualisation of such instances. A pre-requisite for these debates is to establish an overview of extant approaches to the concept of hate crime that will form a working benchmark against which the forms of abuse considered in our research can be measured. What follows is an overview of the key features of hate crime that emerge from the literature; lack of space clearly means that an extended conceptual analysis of the debates surrounding each of them cannot be provided – the intention instead is to provide a framework against which our data can be examined. Three broad themes are reviewed below in terms of debates within existing literature. These are, first, the conceptual difficulty of the term ‘hate’ as applied to complex and contradictory forms of offending. Second is a discussion of the ways in which hate crimes have a communicative element in that they have some wider exclusionary intent beyond the harm intended to the primary victim. Finally, the nature of public and private space in which hate crimes occur is considered. These three themes are subsequently used in the findings section of this paper as a way of considering if the experiences of women subject to misogynistic abuse online can be considered a form of hate crime. We argue that there are significant similarities between these experiences and other recognised forms of hate crime, although also important points of difference. In the final concluding section of this paper we considered the subsequent question: whether this abuse *should* (as opposed to *could*) be reconsidered and responded to as a form of hate crime.

Self-evidently the defining concept of 'hate' is the prevailing focus of much of the debate in the field of hate crime studies. Key concerns relate to the extent to which the motivations of offenders can be reliably identified such that 'hate' can be identified and isolated as an important pre-cursor to a particular crime or incident: the 'mens rea' challenge. Related to this is the potential implication that 'ordinary' offences, or those targeted on individuals regardless of the characteristics of their identity, come not to be characterised in terms of 'hate'. Moreover, research evidence (Bowling, 1999; Ray et al, 2004) suggests that conceptually 'hate' might exaggerate the motivations of offenders, some of whom might be very young and engaging in behaviour that they (and others) might regard as relatively minor forms of anti-social behaviour. Certainly some of the evidence of online abuse uncovered by our study suggests that 'low level' name-calling formed an important part of the picture, alongside more threatening and graphic content. As the literature widely attests, the solution to this challenge in England and Wales has been to couch legislation in terms of 'aggravated' offences such that it is not a requirement for prosecutors to demonstrate that 'racial hatred', for example, was the sole or primary motivation behind the offence. That it was a demonstrable element of the crime or incident is sufficient for a conviction. Conceptually, some (e.g. Lawrence, 1999; McPhail, 2002) advocate consideration of these offences in terms of 'bias' or 'prejudice', to avoid this difficulty of identifying the emotional motivation of the offender. Similarly, Walters and Tumath (2014) focus on 'gender hostility' in order to demonstrate aggravation, rather than gender 'hatred', which is more difficult to prove. Another important practical response from criminal justice agencies has been the adoption of a victim-centric approach such that offences should be recorded as hate crimes if the victim or any other party identifies them as such. The complexity of the concept of 'hate' extends to VAWG and forms of hate crimes that occur between those in familial or personal relationships. Analysis of disablist hate crime, for example, indicates that offending is frequently perpetrated by carers, friends or family members and in cases that do not conform to prevailing conceptions that perpetrators are strangers 'hatred' does not adequately describe the relationship. As Thomas (2016) notes the term 'mate crime' sometimes is used in place of 'hate crime' in recognition that the perpetrators of disablist crime are often, at least overtly, in a positive relationship with those they target. A similar perspective has been applied to VAWG; which has traditionally been excluded from hate crime categorisations in part because of the definition of hate crime as perpetrated against strangers rather than those known to the victim. However, it is the exclusion of a gender analysis and gender advocates from the initial categorisation of hate crime that has allowed it to be so-defined (see McPhail, 2002 on this process in the US, Gelber, 2000, in Australia, and Gill and Mason-Bish, 2013, on the British experience).

The term 'hate' might also be problematic in the particular context of online abuse, given suggestions that the anonymity offered by cyberspace disinhibits the use of offensive or threatening language. Moreover, the impersonality of internet relationships might establish social and emotional distance between perpetrators and recipients such that the content and gravity of language used online is different from that used in real world interactions. Specifically, though, we are not arguing that the online world is a hermetically sealed space in which all is different from real world environments. Later in this paper we explore the continuities as well as differences between the two. In this we recognise Shaw's (2014:274) point that '... people are jerks not only when they are in anonymous Internet spaces, but also when they are in spaces where they can get away with being jerks'. As with other forms of abusive language, though, it is also important to recognise the context and wider dynamics of terminology reported in our study. Particular words are used in some circumstances as an offensive and derogatory epithet, while in other they are used as a 'reclaimed' piece of terminology, and in others still as almost as a term of endearment. For now though, our point is that the term 'hate' might not be sufficiently nimble to discern different meanings and motivations in online environments.

Following from this, another defining characteristic of hate crimes is that they mirror power relations and experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation evident more widely in society. The collective experience of oppression provides a context that often gives hate crime meaning that cannot simply be 'read' from the material, physical or other properties intrinsic to the actions themselves. Even in circumstances where perpetrators are not motivated by 'hate' in a developed or ideological sense, incidents are experienced by victims in ways that reflect wider practices of prejudice and discrimination. Moreover, these wider patterns of prejudice and discrimination are reinforced by hate crime; a defining feature of such crimes is that they communicate prejudice not only to the victim but also to the victim's community. As Gelber (2000: 278) argued hate crimes are a form of 'signal crime, since they 'have a ripple effect beyond their individual victims because they contribute to creating conditions in which violent crimes against some groups in society is able to be justified and condoned'. In the particular context of misogynistic crime, it might be argued that only crimes targeting minority groups should be classified as hate crime (Chakraborti and Garland, 2009). The disproportionate impact of such offences relates not, it is argued, by the actual properties of the incident or the motivation of the perpetrator (which is difficult in any case to discern) but by the relationship between those experiences and wider social, cultural and political marginalisation based on their minority status (Chakraborti and Garland, 2009: 153-4). In the context of racist hate crime, authors such as Bowling (1999) and Cohen (1997) have noted that incidents convey messages of white territoriality and exclusionary intent that are aimed at the wider community that the

immediate victim is seen to represent. Chakraborti and Garland (2004) develop this further by examining the specific context of racist hate crime in rural communities where notions of authentic belonging and identity may be constructed by perpetrators of hate crime in ways that are distinct from those in urban environments. These communicative properties mean that hate crimes operate in a public arena in ways that many other forms of offending seek actively to avoid. Just as cultural criminologists note the 'spectacle' that is inherent to offences from graffiti to terrorism, hate crime is also symbolic in terms of seeking to reinforce social divisions that exist beyond the specific features of the particular offence itself.

Some of these debates have been discussed in recent scholarship exploring the potential categorisation of VAWG as a form of hate crime (Gill and Mason-Bish, 2013; Walters and Tumath, 2014). Problems with the concept of hate as an explanatory framework apply in particular ways to violence against women and girls. Gill and Mason-Bish (2013: 11) argue that ascribing the concept of 'hate' to certain forms of violence against women that are predominantly perpetrated by women (they cite FGM as an example) might not be 'in the spirit of hate crime legislation'. They also note that personal relationships between perpetrators and victims of VAWG mark this offending as distinct from established types of hate crime. Coupled with this, Gill and Mason-Bish (2013) dispute the frequent claim that VAWG is distinct from hate crime on the grounds that it tends to occur in a private rather than a public setting. They note a body of research that suggests that many incidents of hate crime are perpetrated in private domains by perpetrators who are known to victims, as family members, friends, carers, and so on. While this is an important point, we argue further below that this private/public dichotomy is considerably more problematic in the context of the online abuse of women who responded to our survey. Walters and Tumath's (2014) review of the literature on rape, sexual violence and hate crime reflects the wider point made above that categorisation of some behaviour plays a normative role in terms of symbolising the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. In terms of the symbolic dimension of rape and sexual violence they note a recurring theme within the research literature that such offences do – as with hate crime – serve as forms of terrorism intended to instil fear across the wider community (Walters and Tumath, 2014: 574-5). This point reflects Pain's (2014) argument that domestic violence can be considered a form of 'everyday terrorism' and the radical feminist framing of violence against women, from Brownmiller (1975) onwards, as a signal offence which 'operates to sustain the systemic subordination of women within society' (Gelber, 2000). The extent to which the online misogynistic abuse identified in our paper has a comparable role in terms of seeking to intimidate women from the 'cyber commons' of web-based space is explored at greater length further below where we argue that this might be the intention but our respondents suggest it might be counter-productive in practice.

Some core themes emerge from the above, inevitably selective, review – and it is around these central issues that our data is organised in the discussion below. First, respondent’s reflections on the nature of ‘hate’ within the abuse that they have experienced is considered. It is noted that experiences of online abuse are implicitly judged to have greater impact, and to be more hateful, because of the enhanced level of threat relative to experiences of abuse in real world contexts. However, while it is true that the relative anonymity of the online environment often meant that victims could not identify the perpetrator of abuse with certainty, this was clearly not always the case and respondents reflected on the identity and motivation of their abuser(s) in ways that reveal important qualifications about the nature of ‘hate’ in these communications. The intersectional nature of much of the abuse reflected upon by our respondents was often evident. Women were threatened and abused using homophobic or racist language: proponents were not specialists in misogyny. This challenge applies to real world hate crimes, as McPhail (2012) pointed out in the US context, the rape of a woman is not a hate crime unless the victim was targeted on the basis of the perpetrators bias against minorities, on the basis of sexual orientation, disability, or other protected characteristics. She argued that gender-bias was of secondary status in the hierarchy of hate crime and that in the US this partly reflected patriarchal ideology and a pragmatic agenda of not pursuing legislative protection for dimensions of hate crime that might prove controversial.

Second, the symbolic and exclusionary intent of hate crime was clearly identified by many respondents in our research. Unlike established categories of hate crime the online abuse experienced by our respondents did not have an exclusionary intent in physical or geographical sense but instead in terms of being silenced in or denied access to the online community.

Thirdly we discuss the fuzzy boundaries between online and offline experiences. Consideration of the space in which offending occurs has grown in criminological theory and research in recent decades. Studies in environmental criminology and the importance of physical location, architecture, urban planning, and crime prevention technology notwithstanding it remains the case that space is under-theorised in much of the literature (Campbell, 2016). The assumption that space exists only in two-dimensional terms, is surrounded by boundaries, and has relatively fixed shape and dimensions is implicit in much criminological work, and Campbell (2016) argued effectively for a more sophisticated approach that understands space in relational and social terms. Given this, it is important to consider how online territories are imagined and how they relate to off-line ‘real world’ environments.

Findings

Problems with concept of hate

Respondents to our survey and some of those interviewed spoke of their experiences in terms of hate crime. Although questions were not asked directly about hate crime or whether that discourse characterised what had happened to them, concepts and terminology from that framework were drawn upon by some as they reflected on the abuse they had received. One woman interviewed explained that because the abuse she had received was based on her 'born characteristics' it amounted to hate crime since 'this is what hate speech is'. A survey respondent argued that misogynistic abuse is not considered as seriously as other forms of offending because of endemic sexism:

[the] mens' legal system and mens' police forces aren't interested in prosecuting women-hating males who threaten women with male violence because only white men's racism against non-white men and heterosexual male insults levied at homosexual males is supposedly 'real hate crimes'! (Respondent 122)

While 'hate' was seen by many victims to characterise the motivation of abusers it does not necessarily follow that all misogynistic offending can be characterised in such terms. Firstly, the nature of intersectional identity meant that respondents sometimes reflected on their experiences of gendered abuse as a form of hate speech but noted that their racialized identity or perceived sexuality was connoted in the language and terminology used. Women suggested that they were subject to sexist hate crime but in ways that drew upon other offensive tropes. Recipients of abuse reflected on what defined abusive and offensive comments directed towards them, but rarely reported that they distinguished one element from others in terms of intersectional identity. One interviewee reflected that:

So, you know, the abusive stuff I think isn't up for question, you know, if somebody is threatening to kill you or rape you or do something to your family or burn your house down all this kind of stuff, then I don't think there's any kind of, um, question mark over that being abusive. The offensive stuff is more difficult I think to quantify because it's quite personal. So for example, you know, um, you know, some men might go, "You're a fucking fat dyke". Okay, it's offensive ...
(Interview 1)

During one interview a respondent described the cumulative impact of the abuse she received online and offline:

A lot of these were people starting to become slightly racist in the language they were sending and so I got my husband to look at some of them, he said, "I want to delete these, I don't ever want you to look at them" and I asked him to leave them because one day I will be strong enough to look at them but because my address is public I started to get these letters and I got an incredible set of letters which were very racially motivated ... So then eventually [my employer] suddenly realised what was going on with my post and they then start to filter and take the post away and deal with it and agree to send any stuff which is racist, or sexist, or death threats to the police, and they said, "We're not going to tell you what we're doing because you don't need to know this" because I'd got so that I was like beside myself, I wasn't sleeping, I felt really fearful the whole time. (Interview 12)

The intersectionality of prejudice embodied in the extracts above suggests that debate about whether misogynistic incidents ought to be considered as hate crimes becomes more complex since the prejudicial motivation of perpetrators is often multidimensional. A victim-focused response needs to recognise that offending is experienced in a wider social, cultural and personal context, and related to other forms of marginalisation, that mean that the impact is not due to isolated components. Racist, homophobic, or disablist hatred is exacerbated by combination with misogyny but in ways that are unpredictable, mediated by context, and cannot be read simply from textual, visual or graphical content.

Further to the discussion about 'hate crime and mate crime' that was noted above in relation to many of the experiences of crimes targeting disabled people, our respondents sometimes reflected on the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in terms of the position of perpetrators. Unlike victims of some other forms of hate crime, respondents to our survey rarely reported that they had any personal relation with the perpetrator (61 per cent of survey respondents said that the perpetrator was a stranger). However, since the focus of our study was abuse perpetrated on social media, victims were able to view the profile of perpetrators. Often this capacity created opportunities for resisting misogyny: we found that efforts to use abuse to marginalise women from public discussion often had precisely the opposite effect (as is discussed more fully below). One reason for this was that those experiencing online abuse were often engaged in networks of feminist activists and were able to compare their experiences with those of others and to identify common perpetrators who become well-known within the online community. Exploration of the online self-

representation of perpetrators led one respondent to reflect on the difficulty of assigning the concept of 'hate' to their abusive comments:

it was the type of people ... what was quite shocking because the demographic was largely um fairly young boys between about fifteen and twenty five who were the main culprits . . . They'd have their arms round girlfriends you know in their pictures, that's what shocked me, that they would have arms around their own loved females whilst targeting another female and downgrading other females and calling them slags and whores and they would have their arm around the woman you love and then there are the other types of people that did it were um sort of those forty year old men with a baby in their arms saying, "You slag, you need fucking raping, ladaladala". (Interview 16)

Similar points have been made about the problematic application of the concept of hate in relation to racist crimes. Ray et al (2004), for example, argued that the perpetrators they had interviewed were motivated by a combination of resentment, shame and grievance rather than 'racial hatred' in a pure form. As a heuristic device, hate does not capture the complex and contradictory gendered construction of appropriate social identities that was foundational to the abuse uncovered in our research. Perpetrators seemed not to hate women in a categorical sense but rather to be motivated by a perception that women engaging in feminist debate were transgressing appropriate gender roles. In terms of considering the online abuse of women as a form of hate crime, our data suggest that this is problematic but in ways that are complex and challenging in relation to other offence types that have been categorised as hate crime.

Exclusionary intent

As mentioned, our research participants very clearly interpreted the abuse that they received as an attempt to silence their participation in online debate. The abusive speech and images had literal communicative properties but also covertly signalled that women ought not to be engaged in the free exchange of ideas on social media. In many ways this reflects the signalling component of hate crime, a defining element that gives such offences more gravity and makes them more impactful. Respondents were asked about incidents of online abuse that they had experienced and very often the starting point for their description was some contribution they had made to discussion on social media. In many cases, the abusive response was wildly out of proportion with the initial contribution (e.g. a comment about a pink stationery item generated hundreds of abusive comments), but

respondents implicitly couched their experience as a response to an activity they had engaged in. Perpetrators were responding to the vocal presence of women online and their feminist contributions to public debate. While there was a broad range of testimony, the extracts below illustrate the common trend that the abuse was framed as a response to something the recipient had initially voiced:

I had used a hashtag when discussing a recent news event and started to receive hostile or derailing tweets from racist and anti-feminist users who appeared to be monitoring the hashtag in order to prevent feminists having an uninterrupted discussion with each other. (Respondent 115)

I was quoted in a press article speaking out about violence against women. The Facebook newspaper page included (not anon individuals) comments like 'she needs a good kicking in the [REDACTED] ... she's a man hating lesbian and needs a good [REDACTED] to sort her out' ... 'someone should shut her up by [REDACTED] [REDACTED]' ... 'why doesn't someone kick the [REDACTED] out of that ugly [REDACTED]' ... I could go on and on giving examples of the abuse posted. (Respondent 185)

In terms of the impact of online abuse directed at respondents to our study, it was clear that the exclusionary intent of perpetrators tended not to be realised. Indeed, the opposite outcome emerged from our results. The survey revealed a majority of women felt 'galvanised' by their experience and far from being silenced became more vocal in their political activism. Fifty four per cent agreed it made them 'more determined in your political views'. A third (33%) agreed it made them feel motivated to continue to engage in debate. Moreover, while negative impacts, such as anger, worry, vulnerability, fear and sadness reduced over time, feelings of being galvanised to act increased over time. This challenges the idea that online abuse 'silences' women; but it was clearly perceived by our respondents that this was the intention of perpetrators. Our findings complicate the notion that online abuse 'silences' women, but it is worth noting that this galvanising effect may be more evident in this sample of feminists than in the wider population of women. It may be that women who are engaged in feminist debate draw on a feminist analysis to understand their experiences, whereas women less or not at all familiar with a feminist politics of abuse and feminist networks, might have fewer resources to draw on when dealing with online abuse and might feel silenced by it. Even in our sample, the galvanising effect was found alongside reports that women changed their online behaviour, limiting their engagement in selected sites or debates. Clearly it is not a matter of recipients of abuse being *either* silenced *or* galvanised; both consequences may co-exist.

Beard (2013) blogged about her own experiences of being abused on line and argued that contemporary concerns continue long-standing 'cultural awkwardness' about women's public voice and participation in civil society. This study was focused on women who participated in feminist debate online and so wider conclusions cannot be drawn about the more general experience of misogynistic abuse. In this context though there was a clear exclusionary intent behind abuse intended to debar participation held to transgress acceptable gender norms. In this respect it appears that the experiences of victims of online misogyny parallel other forms of hate crime victimisation targeted at those held to be 'out of place' in terms of their physical presence in real-world environments. An important contribution from Chakraborti and Garland's (2004) study was that the 'othering' process aimed at minority ethnic people combined a sense of localism, racism and a concept of authentic belonging in rural communities. Other studies of racist abuse (most notably Bowling, 1999 and Hesse, 1992) have identified the white territorialism that suggests minority communities are not a legitimate presence in certain neighbourhoods.

In relation to this second feature of debate relating to hate crime, our data suggest that the misogynistic abuse of women online clearly did have an exclusionary intent. This took a particular form in that women were not, it appears, intended to be excluded in absolute categorical terms. Further research usefully could examine the extent to which this 'conditional exclusionary intent' applies to other forms of hate speech and also the response of victims to this. Our results found that recipients were far from silenced but were galvanised by their experiences.

The 'fuzzy boundaries' between online and offline space

While it has just been noted that online abuse of women and other forms of hate crime share in common that perpetrators are intending to signal an exclusionary message to those that they target, a key point of difference is the spatial context in which the different types of offence occur. While hate crimes do not always occur in the public domain, many of those that are intended to have a wider impact on the target community are conducted in such a way as to deliver a visible message.

As Awan and Zempi (2016) demonstrated in relation to Islamophobic hate crime, online and offline space are best considered as a continuum rather than distinct domains. Their argument was based, in part, on the notion that victims do not clearly distinguish their online victimisation from that in the real world: both form part of a whole experience. This point is reinforced by our research data as many of our respondents spoke of threatening experiences such that online 'talk' was directed

towards off-line real world assaults of an extreme kind. A respondent to our survey described how online responses to her engagement in media reporting of VAWG resulted in abuse:

I got an email from [name] one evening, I was sat with my partner and I got an email from [name] and the subject of the email was 'please tell me this is not your address'; and I had taken a break from Twitter for an hour ... and he had posted my home address in full online immediately after he had sent a tweet saying, 'This is how you [redacted] [redacted]'. (Interview 3)

Similarly, the following respondent's account demonstrates the intersection of on and offline experiences:

he named the train station local to me in an oblique way. Later on the same forum he had a conversation with himself about making a special visit to a particular person (me) & named the station he'd be catching the train to. This man is a known rapist...He specified his visit would take place over the w/e. The police advised me not to stay alone at my home - or, if I did, to phone them if I heard any odd noises. I live alone so of course it unnerved me. I consider myself to be strong & independent, but he managed to intimidate and frighten me.
(Respondent 85)

It seems that the police responded in the second instance above, and the continuum between online and offline abuse provides a clear imperative for the criminal justice system and other agencies (social media companies for example) to treat online abuse seriously. Not only is the abuse reported by our respondents not 'just speech' in the sense that it can be directly linked to offline crime threats but it is also significant in terms of reinforcing patriarchal gendered norms that form the 'wallpaper of sexism' that helps to normalise misogynistic abuse more generally (Lewis et al, 2015). The links between real world VAWG and social media environments are significant to offences of 'coercive control'. The Crown Prosecution Service guidelines on communications via social media stipulate that 'online activity is used to humiliate, control and threaten victims, as well as to plan and orchestrate acts of violence' (CPS, 2016) but a recent survey suggests the justice system is failing to adequately address this new form of coercive control (Travis, 2017).

The boundaries between online and offline offending are further blurred in relation to the activities of perpetrators. Just as Ray et al (2004) noted that those involved in racist hate crimes are rarely specialists in violence and so perpetrate violent acts in other forms, so too those who engage in

online offending might commit offences in the real world too. Whether they are emboldened to do so by their online experiences or would commit such real-world crimes in any event is an important question but one that remains beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, other evidence suggests that those engaged in online misogyny do so too in offline environments: Williams (2006) study of sexual predators in online environments found that some perpetrators had offended in 'real world' situations that are incontrovertibly the domain of law enforcement agencies.

If considered as social, rather than literal, spaces then the public/private dichotomy between online and real world environments is less significant (Campbell, 2016). The communicative properties of misogynistic speech might be limited to a primary recipient in its initial format (depending on the social media platform) or to a restricted group of members in a forum. However the capacity of perpetrators to target multiple victims and of multiple perpetrators to target single victims (what Jane, 2017:4) calls 'cyber lynch mobs') is hugely enhanced in online environments, even if each instance is still directed at a single individual. A respondent (#130) reported that a single abuser had engaged a much larger number of perpetrators: 'one person 'set' their 10k followers on me for talking about radical feminism. I was told to 'get raped' 'Die in a fire' ... to name but a few.'. A minority of respondents reported very high volumes of abuse from a large number of perpetrators:

I took a picture of a pink office supply item advertised as "for women" and made a sarcastic comment about how now women can work too and tagged #everydaysexism in an attempt to point out even these little things are still a representation of sexism. This was immediately shared by GamerGate all over Twitter, Reddit, and various other sites. Within a few hours it had over 25,000 views and 650 abusive comments on Reddit not including the comments on Twitter. My picture, name, twitter handle, location, profession, were all shared. I feared for my online security as Gamergate is known to hack people's accounts. It took days before I could get moderators to remove my personal information that was shared across sites. I was threatened with rape, abuse, etc. (Respondent 126)

That our study found many instances of women sharing messages amongst their networks, often as a coping mechanism, also meant that social media was at once a private and a public space.

In terms of this third aspect of hate crime research, the place in which our respondents experienced misogynistic abuse was significant; as it is in 'real world' environments. That the abuse was virtual did not lessen its impact because, in many cases reported, there was a clear link between online and offline worlds since both abuse and misogyny in general terms were experienced in both

environments. Moreover, the private space of online communication was breached in various ways as abusive content was shared within networks that are an important site of political and social activism for our respondents.

Conclusion

Having identified three key components of extant debates about the nature of hate crime, the discussion above has considered the ways in which each of those might 'play out' in relation to our findings from victims of online misogynistic abuse. We have noted above that the concept of hate is itself problematic when applied to this type of offending. However, the complexities we have identified are similar in character to those related to forms of hate crime that are broadly recognised in research, policy and legal terms. Second, we have shown that there is a very clear theme that misogynistic abuse has an exclusionary intent that is shared by established forms of hate crime. What also emerges from our study is that this exclusionary intent may not have been absolute and categorical but was often limited in the sense that women should be 'silenced' when transgressing patriarchal gendered norms. It was also clear that although the abuse represented an attempt at silencing it was frequently unsuccessful. A majority of our respondents reported that – despite short term negative impacts – they became more committed to political engagement in the long term in defiance of the abuse that they had received. Thirdly, we found the location of the abuse was significant, as with many forms of hate crime, but that the distinction between private online spaces and public real world sites is unhelpful. There was no binary hierarchy such that the offline world was more significant than online spaces but rather, following other research, we found that the two were continuous. In broad terms, our analysis suggests that the online misogynistic abuse of women in our survey *could* be understood and categorised as a form of hate crime. The remainder of this concluding section moves on to consider the consequential question: *should* online misogyny be considered a hate crime?

In addressing this question, we join scholars and activists who have considered wider questions of including gender, and specifically, violence against women and girls, in hate crime legislation. This dialogue points out the risks to so doing. For example, Gelber (2000) highlights the operational risk that, given widespread normalisation of violence against women whereby traditionally it has not been viewed as a crime, leniency in applying hate crime legislation would prevail and convictions would be *more* difficult to secure. Moreover, the justice system's failure to recognise intersecting identities and to instead insist on singular identity categories does not suggest an ability to develop nuanced responses to abuse on the grounds of more than one identity category. Similar to

Chakraborti et al. (2014) we found considerable evidence that multiple identity characteristics were targeted by abusers. There are also more philosophical risks; Moran (2001), in considering particularly homophobic violence, cautions against invoking the 'violence' of the law that has oppressed, excluded and denied justice to the very group who would seek its defence. However, this abstentionist position prioritises a theoretical analysis of legal intervention over the lived experience of those victimised online and undervalues the gains that have been made through 'working the spaces' of legal institutions and discourses. In addition, there are pragmatic reasons against a hate crime approach to VAWG; the long struggle to have such crimes recognised as matters for public, political and judicial concern reminds us that attempts to reframe it as a hate crime risk diluting some of those gains made, including resources which have been made available for work around specific form such as sexual assault or domestic violence. Alternatively, there are also concerns that if VAWG is conceptualised as a hate crime the sheer number of offences might detract time and resources from hate crimes against minorities

However, the specific type of violence against women which is the focus of this paper – misogynistic online abuse – (see Lewis, Rowe and Wiper, 2016 for a discussion of online abuse as a form of violence against women) presents a valuable opportunity to explore engagement with the hate crime framework, without jeopardising progress made in criminalising VAWG more generally. When other forms of crime that are motivated by hate or prejudice are treated as hate crime, the failure to treat misogynistic online abuse as such – especially given the often explicit and extreme hatred of women expressed - is an anomaly that reinforces problematic notions that gender-based crime is a distinct category that does not quite fit with other forms of prejudice and hate. Naming online misogynistic abuse as a form of hate crime challenges the normalisation of VAWG that has led to its marginalisation from the justice system. Similarly, the argument that legal structures deal inadequately with intersecting identities, goes beyond hate crime and victimisation of women and girls and is a live debate. Relating this debate to online hate crime helps progress these debates and their potential to create more nuanced legal responses. Feminism has revealed the long history of marginalisation of women and women's needs by the legal system, *inter alia*. The definition of hate crime (e.g. as committed by strangers in public) through the exclusion of consideration of gender as a factor is an example of that marginalisation. Rather than tolerating that marginalisation, resisting it by asserting that misogynistic online abuse is a form of hate crime, renders visible the prevalence, normalisation and mundanity of misogyny. We argue, from a sceptical but pragmatic position, that engaging in the debate about misogynistic online abuse as a form of hate crime supports existing critical engagement with the law; engaging is another way of being part of efforts to transform legal

discourse and practice. Moreover, as debates about how to respond to online abuse are in their infancy, now is the moment to ensure inclusion of gender in these debates.

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Submission to the Review of Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates

Submission by Liz Drake

Then Organisation Manager to Warwick and Leamington Conservative Association. Submitted on behalf of Warwick and Leamington Conservative Association.

1. My name is Liz Drake and during the run up to the 2017 General Election I was the Organisation Manager for Warwick and Leamington Conservative Association. I had responsibility for dealing with all communication received by the Association.

2. The Association's office was based in the garden of the private home of the Election Agent; the garden being sheltered, in a semi-rural location, with the actual office screened by trees and bushes.

3. From memory (and the exact day may be incorrect but I think it was the Tuesday or Monday before the election) I picked up a voice mail left by what sounded like a 20-something male. The caller left two messages, one after the other, and did not leave his name or contact details.

4. The message began in a way that had become all too familiar to me since I joined the Association in November 2016 – that is, with the caller asking to either speak to Chris White (then MP for Warwick and Leamington) or for the message to be passed onto him.

5. The caller's tone was aggressive, angry and confrontational, which unfortunately was not unusual. As always, I began to take notes of the callers' grievances against Chris, in the expectation of passing these on to Chris; however the voice mail changed quickly from an angry rant concerning issues relating to Chris' work as an M.P., to comments that included "Theresa May should be _____ and " _____ ories they should all die" type thing. The comment that caused me greatest concern was if he "was to come across a Tory in the street he would * _____ them" (or words to that effect).

6. Given that I knew Chris and his team were out campaigning in Leamington that morning, I immediately phoned Chris' office and relayed the threat to a member of his staff, who then contacted Chris and his team to make them aware. I then contacted the local police who took the issue extremely seriously and sent two officers to Chris White's constituency office; followed by a visit to myself at the Association's Office in the garden of the Election Agent where the office was based. I believe the Agent also contacted the Chairman of the Association to advise of the message.

7. When the Officers arrived, I gave a full statement and a digital recording of the call; I also provided my notes on the message. The police were excellent and took the content of the call very seriously. The police did say that there had been no actual threat made against any one particular individual; however they would still try and trace the call. I provided the call log of all messages taken so as to eliminate legitimate calls.

8. As a precaution, a marked police car was prominently positioned in the Agents' garden that afternoon, where it remained until a few days after the election.
9. The police managed to track the caller and I understand he was interviewed (accompanied by his Mother) by the police. When asked by the police if we would 'like' to press charges, we concluded yes we would. I understand the case is being looked at presently.
10. The impact the call had on myself, the Agent, the Agent's family, (and I assume Chris and the consistency office staff) was significant.
11. Personally, as a woman who has been attacked three separate times by male strangers, it made me feel extremely vulnerable and I was genuinely scared that I, or the Agent, Chris, the constituency office staff or campaigners could be attacked at any moment.
12. When stood at the polling station the day of the election, wearing my Conservative rosette, I did fear something maybe thrown in my face, or worse.
13. I know the message concerned the Agent's family and that the marked police car provided a level of reassurance for the Agent whilst it was stationed in the drive.
14. This is my account of the voice mail message and it's impact. I hope it can be used in a positive way to try and reduce the abuse, vitriol and hatred that political parties/ supporters, staff, MP's, members are subjected to.
15. As a result of this threat, the Association's office will now be relocated to a more central location.
16. As a direct response to this experience, I left my position as Organisation Manager with the Association.

Liz Drake
MA BA(Hons) DipTP



Amnesty International UK

Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates

Submission to the Committee on Standards in Public Life Review

September 2017

Amnesty International United Kingdom Section
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1. Introduction

1.1. This submission focuses on the following areas: degree and nature of intimidation experienced by the Parliamentary candidates at the 2017 General Election; the issue of social media; impact of abuse on political participation; and what can be done to address such intimidation.

It specifically focuses on online abuse against women MPs active on Twitter in the run up to 2017 general election.

1.2. This submission draws on a [study](#) by Amnesty International investigating the extent of online abuse against 177 women MPs active on Twitter between 1 January to 8 June 2017. Through individual interviews and data collected from the social listening tool 'Crimson Hexagon' we analysed almost one million tweets to understand how many of these tweets were abusive, whether some MPs were targeted more than others, and whether there were any trends in such targeting.

1.3. While online abuse is certainly not limited to women MPs, women politicians, especially BAME women, face an extraordinary amount of abuse on social media. This is because deep rooted discrimination and harmful stereotypes with regards to gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and other identities negatively influence the way some individuals communicate online. Subsequently, online abuse against women MPs is often sexist or misogynistic in nature. It is also intersectional and targets women with multiple identities, including those related to their race or religion, the most.

1.4. Interviews carried out by Amnesty International with MPs and other women active in politics indicates that abuse on social media bears a huge psychological impact and has a chilling effect on their right to enjoy freedom of expression online, and exercising their right to equal participation in public and political life, and the right to privacy, among others.

1.5. Amnesty International recommends that social media companies work together with the government to address online abuse, while providing a platform for all individuals to equally exercise their right to freedom of expression freely and without fear. Otherwise, the risk is that women will self-censor themselves online, refrain from engaging on certain subjects or in engaging in political activism, or will choose to leave social media platforms altogether.

1.3. A full write up of the Amnesty International's findings, including selection of graphs, tables, and quotes from affected MPs is available [here](#) and is included in the Annex.

1.4. **Description of the methodology applied for the study, including its limitations in detecting 'truly' abusive tweets and capturing 'false negatives', i.e. tweets not labelled as abusive but being truly abusive, is noted in the Annex and in details available [here](#).**

2. What is the nature and degree of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates, in particular at the 2017 General Election?

2.1. While online abuse cuts across political party lines and almost all women MPs have experienced some form of intimidation, our study shows that women MPs from racial, ethnic or religious

minorities experienced targeted abuse based on their different identities, in addition to the abuse based on their gender.

- 2.2. Among all 177 women MPs active on Twitter, **Diane Abbott – the first black women MP in the UK- received almost half (5.14%) of all abusive tweets in the** in the six-weeks **running up to the election.** For the total period between 1 January and 8 June she received 31.61% of all abusive tweets. Not only did she top the list of MPs for most abusive tweets but she received **10 times more abuse than any other woman MP** in the run-up to the election and **8 times more abuse than any other woman MP** during the entire period of analysis. **The** Type of abuse she received often focused on her race and gender. MPs also told Amnesty International about threats of violence they receive online.
- 2.3. **Excluding Diane Abbott, our study showed that black and Asian women MPs – despite representing only 11% of all women MPs in Westminster - received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs.** Asian women MPs were found to receive 132 abusive tweets per MP. This is 30% higher than white women MPs, who receive 92 abusive tweets per MP. Given the disproportionately high levels of abuse against Diane Abbott, black women MPs were found to receive 2,781 abusive tweets per MP – but when Diane Abbott is excluded from the analysis – the findings show black women MPs receive 81 abusive tweets per MP.

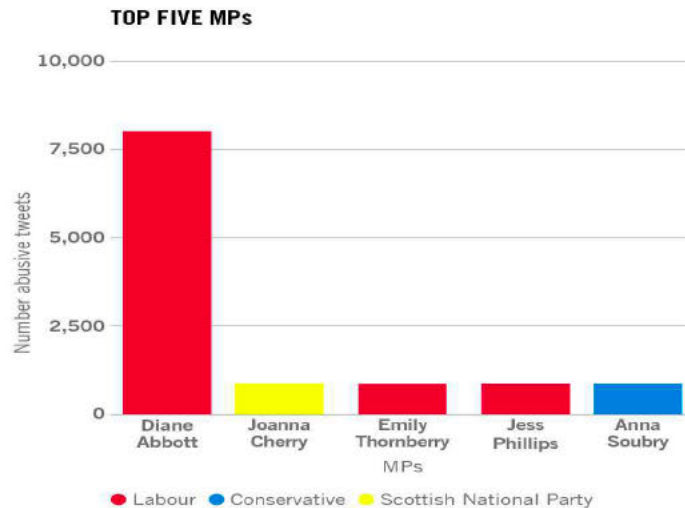
	No. of Abusive tweets		No. of Abusive Tweets per Woman MP		No. of Abusive Tweets per Woman MP per day	
	Total: With Diane Abbott	Total: Without Diane Abbott	Per woman: With Diane Abbott	Per woman: Without Diane Abbott	Per day: With Diane Abbott	Per day: Without Diane Abbott
White	14932	14932	92	92	0.59	0.59
Asian	2117	2117	132	132	0.83	0.83
Black	8345	244	2781	81	13.12	0.51

Examples of abuse sent to Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, a former MP for the Scottish National Party and the first Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) woman from Scotland to be elected to Holy Parliament



- 2.4. Although our findings highlight the intersectional nature of abuse, **we found that no women MP has been free from online intimidation and that online abuse cuts across political party lines.** We found that 2.85% of all tweets sent to women MPs between 1 January and 8 June were identified as abusive amounting to a total of 25 688 abusive tweets out of 900 223 total tweets. The scale of abuse almost doubled in the days leading up to the election seeing the highest levels of abusive tweets at 5.03% in June.
- 2.5. The cross-party nature of online abuse is further demonstrated by the fact that women MPs from the **3 largest political parties are represented in the Top 5 List of Most Abuse Received on Twitter.** Diane Abbott along with Emily Thornberry (Labour), Joanna Cherry (SNP), Amber

Rudd (Conservative) and Angela Rayner (Labour) made up the 5 women MPs receiving the most abuse in the six weeks prior to the snap election. Jess Phillips (Labour) and Anna Soubry (Conservative) also both topped the list for the highest number of abusive tweets during the wider period of analysis between 1 January and 8 June. Although the levels of abuse may vary across political party and individuals, our findings show that **no political party is immune to online abuse** against women MPs on social media.



3. Has the media or social media significantly changed the nature, scale, or effect of intimidation of Parliamentary candidates?

3.1. The internet, and social media platforms in particular, are a critical space for individuals to exercise the right to freedom of expression, and importantly have helped to enhance access to information and visibility of issues affecting lives of the most marginalised groups. Women MPs in particular rely on social media platforms to engage with their constituents and the wider public, and many MPs use social media to speak up about the issues affecting women and other marginalised groups.

3.2. However, **social media platforms can also help to facilitate violence and abuse against women.** It is important to note that online abuse is no less “real” than abuse experienced offline, nor it can be ignored or simply “turned off”. In the words of Diane Abbott, who described to Amnesty International what she believes to be the difference between genuine political criticism and the online abuse that she receives on a daily basis: *“I welcome scrutiny, and I welcome engagement, and I welcome debate. That’s why I was so positive about these online platforms. But the problem is when people are not engaging in debate or scrutiny but just showering you with abuse — [saying] that you are a prostitute, that you are a prostitute, threats against your safety. It’s just abuse which has no political content and which actually people wouldn’t say in a meeting or to your face. I think the distinction between abuse and genuine political debate is, would they say it if they met you in the street? No, they wouldn’t.”*¹

¹ Amnesty International interview with Diane Abbott, July 2017.

3.3. In their joint statement for the International Women’s Day 2017, UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression and on Violence against Women stated that online gender-based abuse assaults basic principles of equality under international law and the right to freedom of expression.² **The right to freedom of expression must apply equally to everyone, and includes the right for women to express themselves and live free from violence and abuse, both online and offline.**

4. **Could the experience of intimidation by Parliamentary candidates discourage people from standing for elected or appointed public offices?**

4.1. Our research shows that there is a real danger that high levels of online abuse against women MPs will have a chilling effect on women taking part in public life — particularly women of colour. This is particularly concerning in the context of women’s political participation in the UK. Although 2017 general election brought a record number of female MPs into the House of Commons, the number of women MPs has been growing at very slow pace and currently is only at 32%. Representation of BAME women, who were found to receive a disproportionate amount of online abuse, is just 11% among all women MPs in Westminster.

4.2. Interviews carried out by Amnesty International with MPs and other women active in politics also demonstrated the psychological impact of the abuse, including damaging the confidence and self-esteem of women MPs. In the words of Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, a former MP for the Scottish National Party and the first BAME woman from Scotland to be elected to any Parliament: *“I can be tough. I can be a mum and deal with this rubbish and still be right out there [again]. And externally, that’s what people see. Internally, it hurts a lot. It really, really hurts a lot. It’s personal. People are criticizing you, where you come from, your parents, what you believe in, the religion which you believe in, and for being a woman, in which you don’t have a choice... so that is really hard to deal with.”*³

4.3. As we approach the centenary of women first voting in the UK general elections, it is fundamental to address the structural barriers affecting women’s right to participate in public and political life equally and meaningfully. In the words of Diane Abbott: *“I think the online abuse I get makes younger women of colour very hesitant about entering the public debate and going into politics. And after all, why should you have to pay that price for being in the public space?”*⁴

5. **What other measures might be effective in addressing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, and candidates for public offices more broadly?**

5.1. **Online abuse against women on this scale should not and does not have to exist on social media platforms.** Governments have an obligation to prevent violence and abuse against women, both offline and online. Social media companies like Twitter also have a responsibility to respect human rights, which means ensuring that women using the platform are able to express themselves freely and without fear.

² <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21317&LangID=E>

³ Amnesty International interview with Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, July 2017.

⁴ Amnesty International interview with Diane Abbott, July 2017.

- 5.2. This enquiry presents an important opportunity for the **UK government to call on social media companies to increase transparency in reporting mechanisms and in resources dedicated to ending online abuse — particularly online abuse against women — on their platforms.** Despite commitments to get tough on online abuse, it is clear that companies like Tweeter needs to do more to enforce adequate and transparent reporting mechanisms that users have confidence in utilizing, especially since online abuse is in breach of the company’s own ‘hateful conduct’ or ‘harmful abuse’ policies. Training about the various ways online abuse manifests on the platform including specific attention to gender and other identity-based abuse, should be mandatory for all staff members, including developers, researchers, and especially moderators. The company should also record and publicly share disaggregated data about the levels of abuse and their response. Twitter needs to be transparent about the resources it’s investing into tackling online abuse.
- 5.3. While cross-sector cooperation between government and social media companies is absolutely fundamental, the UK government must also exercise caution. **Proposals to introduce legal sanctions on companies that fail to remove content are both dangerous and unnecessary.** By pushing liability onto companies, there is a danger this would lead to overbroad restrictions on freedom of speech. According to the UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression and on Violence against Women undue restrictions on content can also have a chilling effect on critical political discussions, and could disproportionately affect women and other marginalized groups.⁵
- 5.4. **The UK government must commit to ensuring that adequate laws, policies and training are both in place and enforced to prevent and end online abuse against women.** This requires capacity building and training of law enforcement about the relevant legislation, including, where appropriate, criminal law, concerning acts of online violence or abuse. Tackling online abuse also includes addressing the source of the problem and investing in programmes such as statutory sex and relationships education that challenge negative gender stereotypes of women in society, which manifests as misogyny and abuse online.
- 5.5. Amnesty International also supports the recommendation put forward in the [report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence](#) about the importance of government’s establishing long-term funding model for specialist services that alleviates current funding pressures, and provides security and consistency for the future. This should be delivered alongside additional support from social media companies— such as technology user guides and manuals – to enable specialist services to effectively safeguard survivors.
- 5.6. The enquiry must also ensure that an **intersectional gender lens is applied to any recommendations** which recognizes the different ways that women, and especially women with different identities, experience online abuse. Any response to this issue must also recognize that **online abuse against women is an extension of existing offline discrimination and gender inequality.** A failure to do so will have serious consequences for women now and in the generation to come.

⁵ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21317&LangID=E>

ANNEX

Full write up of the Amnesty International findings on twitter abuse against women MPs, also available on: <https://medium.com/@AmnestyInsights/unsocial-media-tracking-twitter-abuse-against-women-mps-fc28aeca498a>

Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs

“I’ve had death threats, I’ve had people tweeting that I should be hung if ‘they could find a tree big enough to take the weight’... I’ve had rape threats.. over and over and over again”

Diane Abbott, UK MP and Shadow Home Secretary, July 2017

Diane Abbott’s testimony during a recent parliamentary debate about intimidation against members of parliament (MPs) was the first time many people heard the extent of sexist and racist abuse facing women in UK politics. But for women MPs who are active on social media platforms, these harmful encounters are something they must contend with daily.

At Amnesty, we’ve been investigating the extent of online abuse against women MPs active on Twitter in the UK through individual interviews and by using machine learning to detect abusive tweets sent to women MPs. The findings outlined in this post provide a detailed look at abuse on Twitter in the run-up to the 2017 election — in which Diane Abbott’s case stands out for all the wrong reasons.

The online abuse she and other women MPs experience sits in a wider context of pervasive and damaging attacks against women from all walks of life on social media platforms. For the last eight months I’ve been speaking to journalists, activists, bloggers, comic book writers, comedians and women active in all levels of politics and public life to hear about their experiences of abuse on social media platforms. I’ve had numerous long chats with women in cafés, parks, hotel lobbies, at youth centres or via Skype, and each time I hear the same message. **Twitter can be a scary place for women online.** Whether women use social media platforms as public figures or for personal use, the threat of abuse is all too real and it is having a silencing effect on women’s participation online and in the public sphere.

A Toxic Place for Women

While online abuse is certainly not limited to women in the public eye, women politicians face an extraordinary amount of abuse on social media. To understand just how much abuse women MPs face online we worked with a data scientist to analyse a sample of Twitter data from 1 January to 8 June, with a focus on the six weeks prior to the 8 June UK election. We wanted to understand how many of the tweets sent to women MPs were abusive, whether some MPs were targeted more than others and if there were trends in such targeting.

We also wanted to use Twitter’s own data to demonstrate the scale of online abuse and to show how discrimination against women doesn’t just disappear when you move into the digital world.

Gender inequality in society exists both online and offline and people of all genders can experience online abuse. However, deep rooted and negative gender stereotypes against women also influence the way some individuals communicate online. This means that online abuse against women is often sexist or misogynistic in nature, and online threats of violence against women can be sexualized and usually include specific references to women's bodies.

Our sample of 900 223 tweets between 1 January and 8 June was drawn from social listening tool Crimson Hexagon. **Crucially, because we could only download historical Twitter data, our sample did not include tweets that have been deleted or tweets from accounts that were suspended or disabled.** We made multiple requests to Twitter for access to a full data set covering the period of analysis but our requests were refused. This means we can only assume the true scale of abuse facing women MPs was even higher than our results show.

It is also important to note that any automated or semi-automated data analysis is imperfect. Further information on the figures used in this study can be found at end of this post including a link to our full methodology.

Despite the limitations in the data, the results of our study were striking. The analysis revealed the following:

- **Diane Abbott received almost half (45.14%) of all abusive tweets in the run up to the Election**
- **Excluding Diane Abbott, black and Asian women MPs in Westminster received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs**
- **Online abuse cuts across party lines, affecting women from all UK political parties**

Interviews with women MPs also highlight the serious psychological impact of online abuse. Overall, our study demonstrates just how much more work needs to be done by social media companies and governments to tackle this ever-growing problem.

1. Diane Abbott Receives the Most Online Abuse

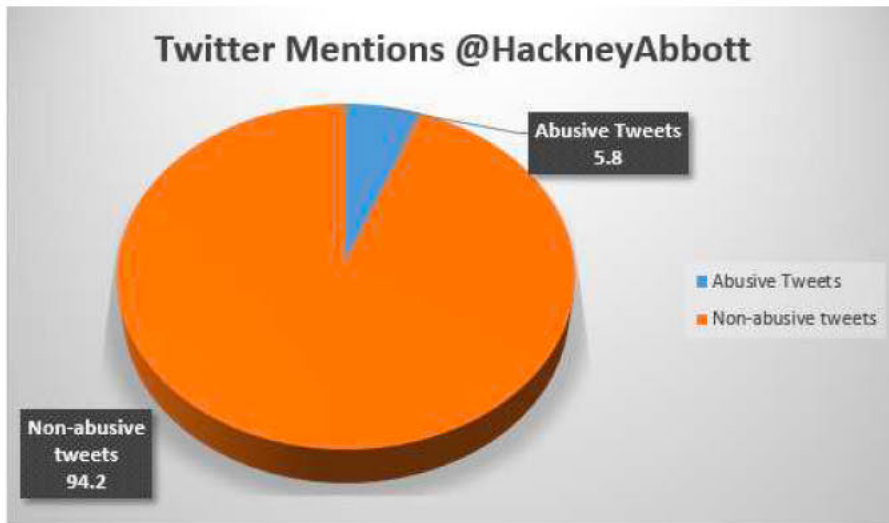
Earlier this year, Amnesty International hosted a [Hackathon](#) with Accenture Digital during which participants were tasked with quantifying and analysing abuse against women MPs online. Over the two days, the high levels of abuse against Diane Abbott in the data set was flagged by almost every group of participants at the event. With these early findings, we were keen to find out whether a dedicated data scientist applying a more fine-tuned and tested methodology to the same data would produce a similar result. The detailed analysis confirmed these initial findings.

In the six weeks prior to 8 June, **Diane Abbott received almost half or 45.14% of all abusive tweets** against women MPs included in our study. For the total period of analysis between 1 January and 8 June she received **31.61% or almost one-third of all abusive tweets**. Not only did she top the list of MPs for most abusive tweets but she received **10 times more abuse than any other woman MP** in the run-up to the Election and **8 times more abuse than any other woman MP** during the entire period of analysis.

		No. of Abusive Tweets	% Abusive Tweets	MP	Political Party
Whole Period					
	1	8121	31,61%	Diane Abbott	Labour
	2	1025	3,9%	Joanna Cherry	SNP
	3	1023	3,9%	Emily Thornberry	Labour
	4	1002	3,9%	Jess Phillips	Labour
	5	875	3,4%	Anna Soubry	Conservative
6 Weeks Before					
	1	4512	45,14%	Diane Abbott	Labour
	2	458	4,58%	Emily Thornberry	Labour
	3	368	3,68%	Joanna Cherry	SNP
	4	347	3,47%	Amber Rudd	Conservative
	5	303	3,03%	Angela Rayner	Conservative

Abusive Tweets 1 January — 8 June / Abusive Tweets 6 weeks prior to 8 June Election

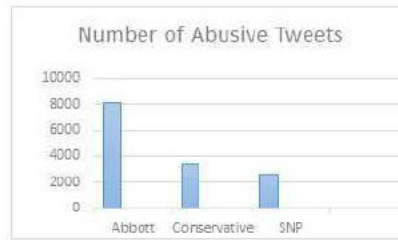
Our findings show that **5.8% or 8121 out of 140 057** of all tweets mentioning @HackneyAbbott were classified as abusive.



Percentage of Abusive Tweets Mentioning @HackneyAbbott

This means that Diane Abbott alone received more abuse during the total period of analysis (1 January to 8 June) than all women MPs from the Conservative and Scottish National Parties combined.

	No. Of Abusive Tweets
Diane Abbott	8121
Conservative	3378
Scottish National Party	2657



Twitter Abuse Diane Abbott vs. Conservative and SNP combined

As the first black woman MP elected into Parliament, Diane Abbott is no stranger to targeted abuse. Thirty years after she was first elected, we met in her Westminster office, a small room overflowing with books and policy folders. On her desk, in between stacks of papers sits a framed photo of her with Nelson Mandela. Diane explained to me the difference between the abuse she faced back then and the abuse she faces now.

“When I was a new member of parliament, you might get one racist letter a week. But that was because if you were racist and you wanted to abuse an MP, you had to write a letter, you had to put it in an envelope, you had to put a stamp on it and you had to put it in the letter-box. Now, some days, we can get hundreds of items of abuse, depending on what happened the previous day.”

“It’s the volume of it which makes it so debilitating, so corrosive and so upsetting. It’s the sheer volume. And the sheer level of hatred that people are showing.”

She also described what she believes to be the difference between genuine political debate or even criticism of her policies and the online abuse that she receives on a daily basis.

“I welcome scrutiny, and I welcome engagement, and I welcome debate. That’s why I was so positive about these online platforms. But the problem is when people are not engaging in debate or scrutiny but just showering you with abuse — [saying] that you are a [redacted] that you are a [redacted] threats against your safety. It’s just abuse which has no political content and which actually people wouldn’t say in a meeting or to your face. I think the distinction between abuse and genuine political debate is, would they say it if they met you in the street? No, they wouldn’t.”



Examples of Abusive Tweets mentioning @HackneyAbbott

Upon hearing about the disproportionate levels of abuse against her, Diane Abbott told me,

“Although [I’m] not entirely surprised by the results of the research, it is truly sickening to see it in figures. These individuals believe it is acceptable to hurl this level of abuse directly at me, knowing there are little to no consequences to their actions.”

2. The More Identities You Have, The More Abuse You Face

The combination of racist and sexist abuse received by Diane Abbott is reflective of a wider trend of ‘intersectional discrimination’. That is, discrimination that targets an individual on the basis of their different identities.

Any analysis of online abuse against women should not be limited to only applying a gender lens to the data. When you are a woman with multiple or intersecting identities, your experience of the world is not just limited to your gender. Your race or disability or sexual orientation, for example, can have just as much of an effect as your gender — if not more — on how you are treated both in the physical and digital world. In the case of online abuse, women of colour, religious or ethnic minority women, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LBTI) women, women with disabilities, or even non-binary individuals who don’t conform to traditional gender norms of male and female, will often experience abuse that targets these different identities.

Diane Abbott standing out in our analysis is an acute example of how intersectional discrimination works. The abuse that she faces is not just sexist and misogynistic; it’s also incredibly racist.

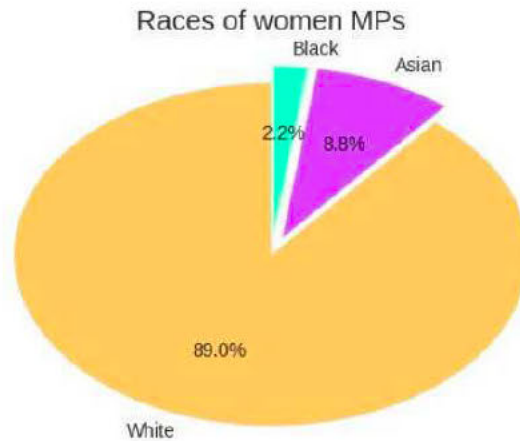


Examples of Abusive Tweets mentioning @HackneyAbbott

For example, she recounted to me the response she received after she spoke about her experience of online abuse in a recent parliamentary debate.

“My office got flooded with communications, both by letter and by email. People sent us emails and letters full of swastikas, people sent us postcards and letters with pictures of monkeys and chimps. People sent us hundreds of emails using the word — that’s the sort of response we get. It’s highly racialised and it’s also gendered because people talk about rape and they talk about my physical appearance in a way they wouldn’t talk about a man. I’m abused as a female politician and I’m abused as a black politician.”

Our findings demonstrate intersectional online abuse against women MPs in more than one way. Despite representing only 8.8% of women MPs in Westminster, Asian women MPs were found to receive the most abusive tweets per MP.

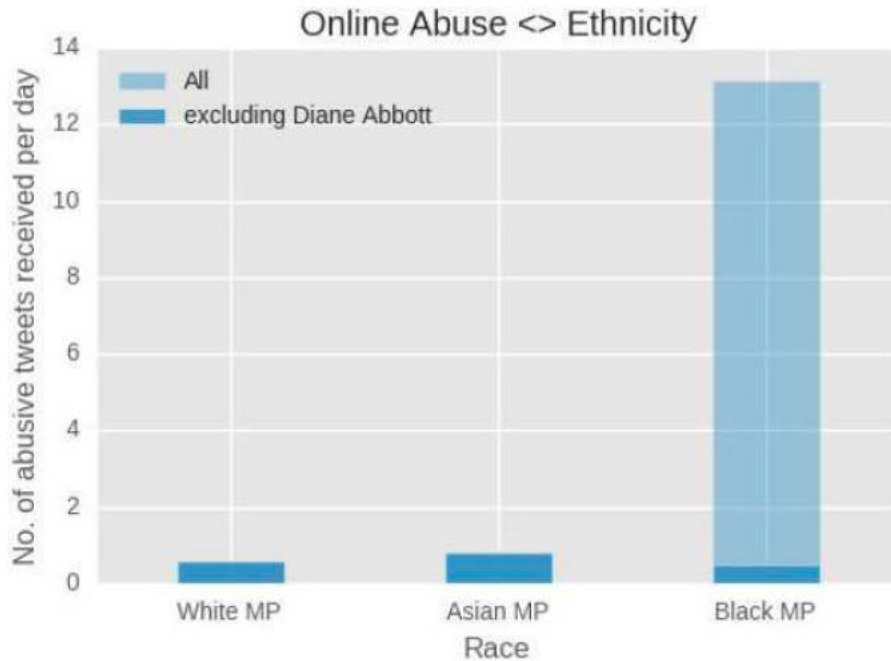


Race of Women MPs in Westminster

	No. of Abusive tweets		No. of Abusive Tweets per Woman MP		No. of Abusive Tweets per Woman MP per day	
	Total: With Diane Abbott	Total: Without Diane Abbott	Per woman: With Diane Abbott	Per woman: Without Diane Abbott	Per day: With Diane Abbott	Per day: Without Diane Abbott
White	14932	14932	92	92	0.59	0.59
Asian	2117	2117	132	132	0.83	0.83
Black	8345	244	2781	81	13.12	0.51

Number of Abusive Tweets Received by Women MPs Categorized by Race

Our analysis shows that **Asian women MPs receive 132 abusive tweets per MP**. This is 30% **higher than white women MPs who receive 92 abusive tweets per MP**. Given the disproportionately high levels of abuse against Diane Abbott, black women MPs were found to receive 2,781 abusive tweets per MP — but when Diane Abbott is excluded from the analysis — the findings show **black women MPs receive 81 abusive tweets per MP**.



Number of Abusive Tweets Per Day against Women MPs Categorized by Race

Earlier this summer I spoke to Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, a former MP for the Scottish National Party and the first Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) woman from Scotland to be elected to any Parliament whose Twitter account was also included in our analysis. Tasmina explained how she began experiencing online abuse during her campaign for the 2015 general election.

“When I was elected in 2015 and even during my election campaign, I found myself at the other end of horrific levels of abuse. And the question is: why might that be? Is everyone receiving the same levels of abuse? Is it women? Is it because I’m Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME)?”

When I asked Tasmina for examples of the type of abuse she faced she told me that somebody once tweeted her home address and postcode which then required police to patrol her house. The police have also advised Tasmina to designate a safe room in her house where her family should meet in case a threat made online should transpire. She also recalled a pile-on of abuse she received after appearing on BBC Question Time in November 2016.

“People said I should be grabbed by the , that I should have items inserted into me...people were inciting others on Twitter to follow on the bandwagon and retweet [the abuse]. These people have been reported to the police, as have others who have suggested that my family should be bombed or my house blown up... ”





Leave means Leave.
@007harvey



@DavidAHoward @TasminaSheikh
@ScotWomenSport Typical muslim full of



11/11/2016, 22:04

Examples of Abusive Tweets Received By or Mentioning Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh

Tasmina wasn't surprised about the high levels of online abuse experienced by Asian women MPs. She explained:

"I am from a Scottish Asian community. I am a Muslim. And I'm a Woman. So it's everything. It has an exponential effect, so people will pile on for a variety of different reasons. Some of them because you are all of these things, and some because you are one of these things, or two of these things, which makes it so much more difficult to deal with, because you just wonder where do I start with this?"

3. Online Abuse Crosses Party Lines

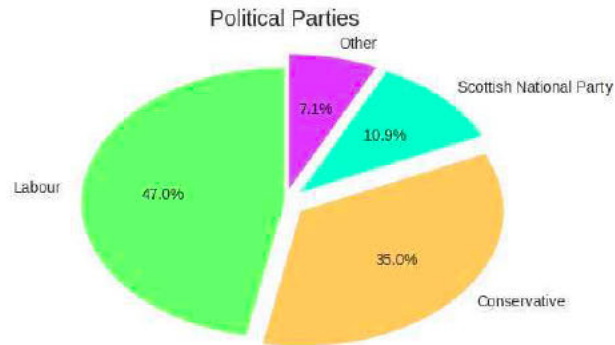
Although our findings highlight the intersectional nature of online abuse against women MPs, it's important to recognize that online abuse affects almost **all** women MPs and cuts across political party lines. Our analysis found that **2.85% of all tweets** sent to women MPs between 1 January and 8 June were identified as abusive amounting to a total of **25 688 abusive tweets out of 900 223 total tweets**.

Online abuse against women MPs on Twitter almost doubled in the run-up to the snap election with the days leading up to the election seeing the highest levels of abusive tweets at **5.03%** in June.

Month	No. of abusive tweets	% of abusive tweets	Total number of tweets	Total number of tweets (+duplicates)
Jan	4101	2,53%	161678	489671
Feb	5411	2,97%	181745	502336
Mar	3916	2,45%	159760	489784
Apr	4478	2,68%	167079	505743
May	6035	3,09%	195268	5573376
Jun	1747	5,03%	34693	84437
Total	25688	2,85%	900223, ~0.9M	2629347

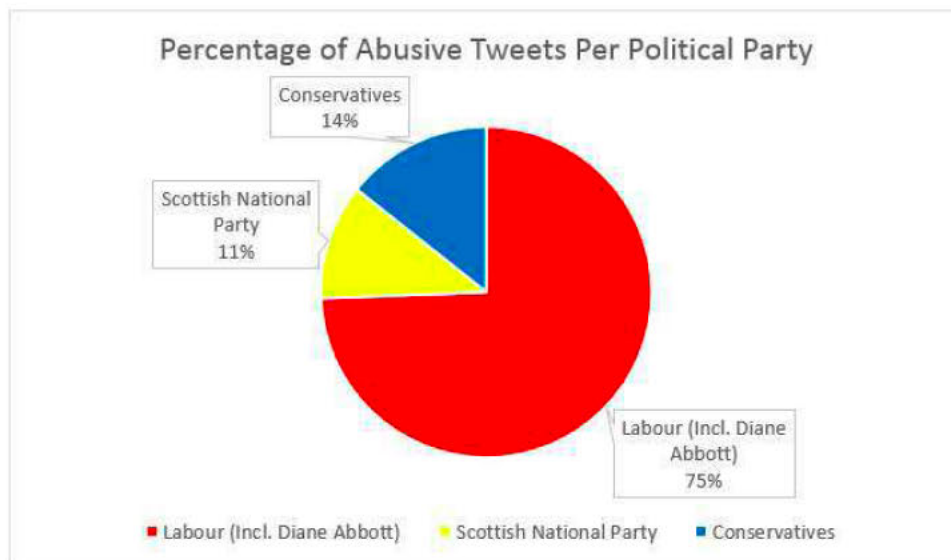
Total Number and Percentage of Abusive Tweets by Month

Online abuse also **cuts across political parties**. Below is a breakdown of political party representation of women MPs in the UK as well as online abuse by party affiliation.



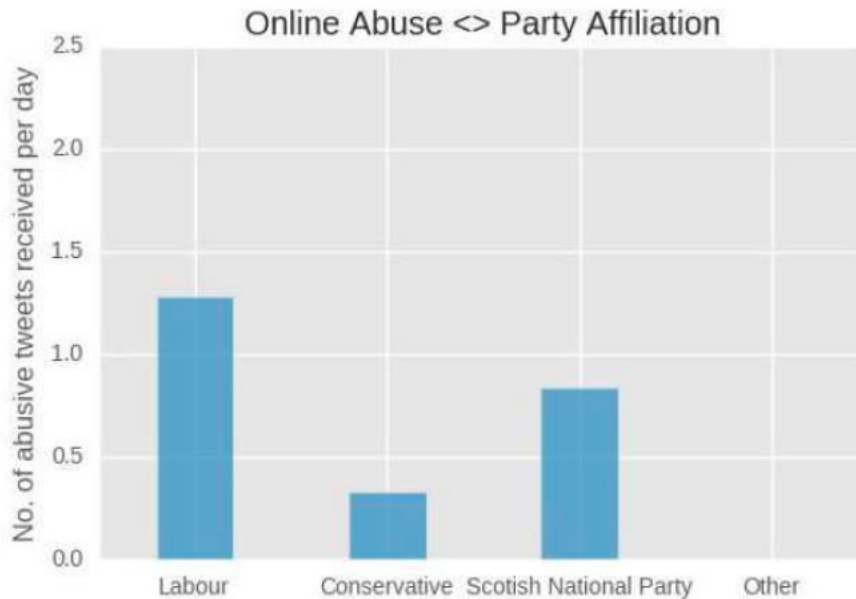
Proportion of Women MPs per Political Party

Since the disproportionate amount of abuse received by Diane Abbott skews the results, with her included Labour receive by far the most abusive tweets per MP. However, if excluded, SNP party members received the most abuse, with SNP women MPs receiving almost half of all abusive tweets in our study.



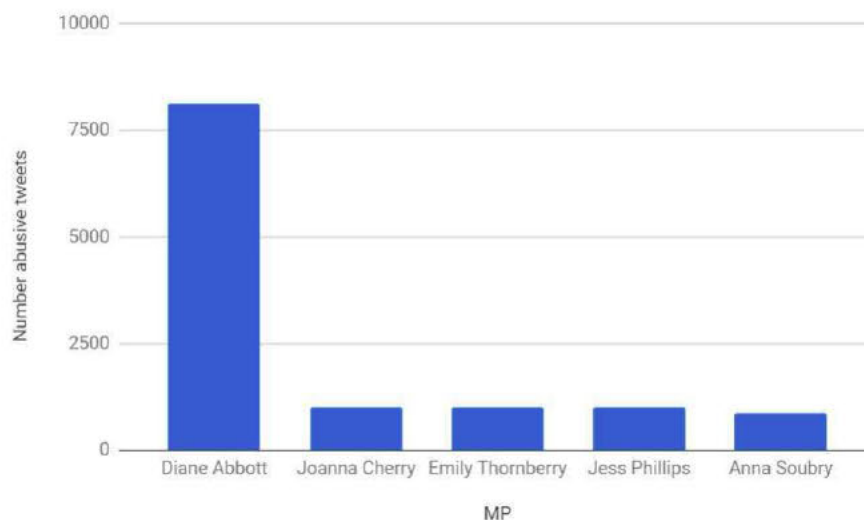
Online Abuse Per Political Party (Excluding Diane Abbott)

Although the levels of abuse may vary across political party and individuals, our findings show that **no political party is immune to online abuse** against women MPs on social media.



Number of Abusive Tweets Per Day by Political Party

The cross-party nature of online abuse is further demonstrated by the fact that women MPs from the three largest political parties are represented in the Top 5 List of Most Abuse Received on Twitter. Diane Abbott along with Emily Thornberry (Labour), Joanna Cherry (SNP), Amber Rudd (Conservative) and Angela Rayner (Labour) made up the five women MPs receiving the most abuse in the six weeks prior to the snap election. Jess Phillips (Labour) and Anna Soubry (Conservative) also both topped the list for the highest number of abusive tweets during the wider period of analysis between 1 January and 8 June.



Number of Abusive Tweets vs Top 5 MPs (1 January to 8 June)

In December 2016, after receiving threatening tweets she subsequently reported to the police, Conservative MP Anna Soubry [posted](#) about her experience of online abuse. She stated,

“Like all MP’s I regularly and increasingly receive offensive emails, tweets and the like...I welcome forthright debate and do not object when constituents exercise their right to contact me in no uncertain terms. But I am no longer prepared to accept foul abuse, misogyny and hate....We must all reset the dial of debate to a more tolerant, better informed and honest level. If we don’t, those who revel in bully boy tactics will win and we run the risk of losing our hard won rights to free speech and democracy.”



Example of abusive tweet mentioning Anna Soubry

Labour MP Emily Thornberry was also not shocked when hearing about her high ranking in our analysis. She explains,

“I wouldn’t say I’m surprised because I think it tends to correlate to the media profile you have, and obviously the election campaign meant doing a lot of TV and radio, so perhaps it was inevitable. I guess other people may be surprised because the abuse is not something I ever talk much about in public.”

She adds, *“On a practical level, the violent stuff and the death threats are just very time-consuming. There’s a big process to go through on each occasion with the police and the House authorities, there’s obviously extra security measures you have to put in place each time, and also if your kids see the tweets or it’s the first time for new members of staff, you have to do a lot of reassurance with them that they shouldn’t worry. Obviously you’re partly reassuring yourself as well.”*

The Impact of Abuse on Women Expressing Themselves Online

For many individuals, social media platforms have now become the medium of choice to express abusive behaviour. Some people may think that online abuse is ‘less real’ than offline abuse, that online abuse can be easily ignored, or that women can simply ‘turn off’ these platforms — and by extension choose to stop receiving abuse. However, these responses not only deny women their right to freedom of expression, they fail to recognize that ‘turning off’ is not always an option for women who wish to (or need to) stay engaged online.

Women MPs, in particular, rely on social media platforms to engage with their constituents and the wider public outside of traditional office drop-in hours. As Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh explains:

“Social media is hugely important tool... from a politician’s perspective or from anyone’s perspective who wants to get information out in public domain, it’s a great, great way of doing it”.

Nevertheless, online abuse or even the threat of it can drive women off platforms like Twitter and have a chilling effect on women speaking out online.

Ensuring that everyone can participate freely online and without fear is vital to ensuring that the internet promotes freedom of expression equally. Otherwise, the risk is that women will self-censor themselves online, refrain from engaging on certain subjects or in political activism, or will choose to leave social media platforms altogether.

The Psychological Toll of Online Abuse

While our findings demonstrate the scale of online abuse facing women MPs, they do not measure the psychological impact of that abuse. [Research](#) carried out by the Association for Progressive Communications, an organization at the forefront of addressing technology related gender-based violence issues, found that online abuse *“can cause psychological and emotional harm, reinforce prejudice, damage reputation, cause economic loss and pose barriers to participation in public life, and may lead to sexual and other forms of physical violence.”*

Samantha Silverberg, a Licensed Mental Health Specialist and Co-Founder of [Online SOS](#) , explains the extent of mental health implications on individuals experiencing abuse or harassment online: *There is little research examining the psychological toll online abuse has on individuals. Anecdotally, we can see [the toll] when individuals are fearful of opening their emails, unable to return to work, or are making other changes to their daily lives based on fears related to the abuse.”*

When I first asked Diane Abbott about how online abuse has personally impacted her, she did not immediately open up and spoke instead about the negative impact on her staff who often deal with the large volumes of abuse she receives. However, after a long pause, she admitted, *“Online abuse does damage you, it damages your confidence and it corrodes your self-esteem”.*

Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh was emotional as she opened up to me about the implications of receiving torrents of abuse online.

“[Online abuse] is very difficult and very upsetting. It has been really difficult for me to deal with because I’ve sat and I have wondered why I am doing this and my family wonder why I’m doing this.

“I can be tough. I can be a mum and deal with this rubbish and still be right out there [again]. And externally, that’s what people see. Internally, it hurts a lot. It really, really hurts a lot. It’s personal. People are criticizing you, where you come from, your parents, what you believe in, the religion which you believe in, and for being a woman, in which you don’t have a choice... so that is really hard to deal with.”

But you have got to stand up like I am doing now and not pretend you can cope when actually you are not.”

So What Should be Done?

Online abuse against women on this scale should not and does not have to exist on social media platforms. Companies like Twitter have a responsibility to respect human rights, which means ensuring that women using the platform are able to express themselves freely and without fear.

Twitter themselves acknowledge this. In 2015, Twitter announced its plans to get tough on online abuse, with the company’s General Counsel, Vijaya Gadde, [declaring](#) in an op-ed that “freedom of expression means little as our underlying philosophy if we continue to allow voices to be silenced because they are afraid to speak up”.

And yet this is exactly what is happening. Online abuse flourishes on the platform, making it a toxic space for women. A recent [study](#) published on 22 August by the Fawcett Society and [Reclaim the Internet](#) reviewed a range of abusive and violent content on Twitter which was then reported to the platform by anonymous accounts. However, one week later, the reported posts remained on Twitter and the accounts which reported the abuse received no further communication from the platform.

Twitter, first and foremost, must enforce its own policies on hateful conduct and abuse. Much of the abuse detected by Amnesty contravenes Twitter's own [Terms of Service and Community Standards](#). Yet, months later, the abuse remains on the platform. Although the company states that '*it doesn't tolerate behaviour that harasses, intimidates or uses fear to silence another person's voice*', this is exactly what is happening to many women who use their platform, including women in the highest levels of government.

How our policy works

As explained in the Twitter Rules,

- **Hateful conduct:** You may not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease. We also do not allow accounts whose primary purpose is inciting harm towards others on the basis of these categories.

Examples of what we do not tolerate includes, but is not limited to behavior that harasses individuals or groups of people with:

- violent threats;
- wishes for the physical harm, death, or disease of individuals or groups;
- references to mass murder, violent events, or specific means of violence in which/with which such groups have been the primary targets or victims;
- behavior that incites fear about a protected group;
- repeated and/or non-consensual slurs, epithets, racist and sexist tropes, or other content that degrades someone.

Twitter Rules on Hateful Conduct

In July, Twitter [stated](#) that they are now taking now taking action on 10X the number of abusive accounts every day compared to the same time last year. But it's clear that Twitter needs to invest more resources to enforce adequate and transparent reporting mechanisms that users have confidence in utilizing. Training about the various ways online abuse manifests on the platform, including specific attention to gender and other identity-based abuse, should be mandatory for all staff members, including developers, researchers, and especially moderators. The company should also record and publicly share disaggregated data about the levels of abuse and their response. Twitter needs to be transparent about the resources it's investing into tackling online abuse.

The UK government has an obligation to protect women from human rights abuses and has taken some steps to address violence and online abuse targeting women on social media. The Committee on Standards in Public Life will soon hold a hearing about online and offline intimidation of Parliamentary candidates during the 2017 election period. The hearing is part of a Parliamentary

Enquiry launched by Prime Minister Theresa May to investigate both online and offline abuse against all MPs and other standing candidates.

The enquiry presents an important opportunity to call on social media companies to increase transparency in reporting mechanisms and in resources dedicated to ending online abuse — particularly online abuse against women — on their platforms. The enquiry must also ensure that an intersectional gender lens is applied to any recommendations which recognizes the different ways that women, and especially women with different identities, experience online abuse.

The UK government must also exercise caution. [Introducing legal sanctions](#) on companies that fail to remove content are both dangerous and unnecessary. The UK government must commit to tackling the source of the problem and invest in programmes that challenge negative gender stereotypes of women in society which manifests as misogyny and abuse online. The government must also ensure that any response to this issue recognizes that online abuse against women is an extension of existing offline discrimination and abuse against women. A failure to do so will have serious consequences for women now and in the generation to come.

Nearly ninety years after women won the right to vote, there is a real danger that the high levels of online abuse against women MPs will have a chilling effect on women taking part in public life — particularly women of colour. This is not only detrimental in terms of the possible long-term effect on the representation of women in politics in the U.K but also continues to deepen societal inequality between genders.

“I think the online abuse I get makes younger women of colour very hesitant about entering the public debate and going into politics. And after all, why should you have to pay that price for being in the public space?”

(Diane Abbott, Amnesty International Interview, July 2017)

Notes on Figures Included in This Study

Our analysis found that between 1 January and 8 June **25 688 tweets out of 900 223 total tweets** were identified as abusive. The true positive rate, i.e. the tweets labelled as abusive by the model that are truly abusive, is around 64%. The remaining tweets are false positives, i.e. not truly abusive. This means that we expect the number of truly abusive tweets within the 25,688 tweets to be 16,440 (= 0.64 X 25,688).

However, a large number of abusive tweets are **not** captured by the model. Only about 44% of truly abusive tweets are detected and the rest are false negatives, i.e. tweets not labelled as abusive but are truly abusive. This means that our estimate of the actual number of abusive tweets out of the 900 223 total number of tweets is around 37 364 truly abusive tweets (= 16,440 / 0.44). For the purpose of this publication, we have used the 25,688 figure.

You can find our full methodology [here](#).

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The Lord Bew

Review of Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates

Committee on Standards in Public Life

GC:05

1 Horse Guards Road

London

SW1A 2HQ

By email to: public@public-standards.gov.uk

Tuesday, 19 September 2017

RE: Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates

Dear Lord Bew

At a hearing of the Committee on Standards in Public Life you requested further information from all political parties regarding actions taken against members during the election campaign.

The Chairman of the Labour Party, Ian Lavery MP, has asked me to provide you with some further information about actions taken against members during the election campaign.

The Labour Party is responsible for enforcing its rule book and associated codes of conduct. Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates by a Labour Party member would be treated in the same way as intimidation of any member of the public – as behaviour which is deemed unacceptable by Party members and outwith the Party's rules. The Labour Party rule book places an expectation of comradely behaviour on all its members.

The Party has, in its Rule Book, rules governing the conduct of members towards other members (including candidates). It applies an expected standard of behaviour upon all members of the Party to ensure that they do not engage in the intimidation of candidates. Where a member does engage in conduct which is deemed to be prejudicial and/or grossly detrimental to the Party, there are a range of sanctions available from a formal warning through to an administrative suspension pending a full investigation and hearing of the Party's disciplinary body, the National Constitutional Committee. These are designed to protect members and candidates for the Party as well as the Party's own reputation. The Party is currently working on implementing a "one-stop-shop" for all complaints in the form of a new unit who will guarantee response times & SLAs as part of a new package of measures to improve complainant-care.

Although we do not have specific figures for acts of harassment against candidates during the local and general elections in 2017, I thought it might be useful to give you an overview of

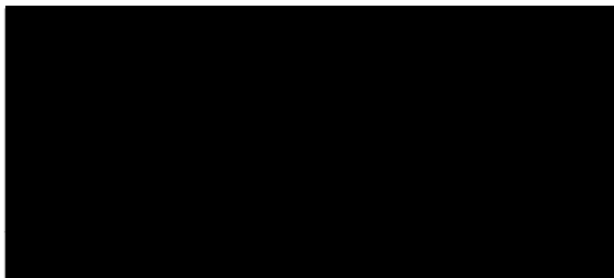
disciplinary action taken by the Labour Party against its own members for breaches of the Party's rulebook.

- 88 individuals have been excluded from membership of the Labour Party for rule breaches that make them automatically ineligible to be or remain members.
- 34 members have been administratively suspended from holding office or representing the Labour Party, pending full investigation and/or disciplinary hearings. Examples include allegations of offensive comments; graphic threats of violence against journalists; antisemitic comments or abuse; abuse of other Labour party members or politicians and abuse of politicians from rival political parties.
- Since the election, eight members have been referred to disciplinary hearings of the National Constitutional Committee. These largely consist of cases involving antisemitic comments or abuse, or prejudicial or abusive conduct toward of other members or politicians. However these allegations refer to incidents which occurred prior to the election.

The Labour Party has a zero tolerance policy on all forms of intimidation – particularly if they appear to be in any way motivated by prejudice. The rules are very clear that *“No member of the Party shall engage in conduct which in the opinion of the NEC is prejudicial, or in any act which in the opinion of the NEC is grossly detrimental to the Party”*.

I hope this information is useful in aiding your understanding of how seriously the Labour Party takes the issue of intimidation and harassment of others.

Yours sincerely



John Stolliday
Director of Governance and Legal Unit

Inappropriate Behaviour: Experiences of 2017 Parliamentary Candidates
Evidence from the Representative Audit of Britain Study (ESRC – ES/M500410/1)

Submitted to the Committee on Standards in Public Life
19 September 2017

Dr Sofia Collignon Delmar
University of Strathclyde

Dr Jennifer Hudson¹
University College London

Dr Wolfgang Rüdig
University of Strathclyde

Professor Rosie Campbell
Birkbeck, University of London

¹ Corresponding author. We thank Linda Hein and Naveen Saini for their research assistance.

1. Sample and data

This evidence is based on early data, the first 733 responses received out of the 2825 candidates we have contacted; giving a response rate of 25.9%. The total response rate to our 2015 survey was 57% and we have no reason to anticipate a lower response rate at the end of data collection for the 2017 survey. We therefore stress that these early results may change as we increase our sample size.

For comparability to previous studies, our questions are similar to those by David James who conducted a survey of MPs on harassment in 2010.² Our sample includes N= 733 candidates (including 2015 MPs who stood again) from the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru, UKIP and Green parties (see Table A1). With respect to gender, 229 respondents identify as female, 502 identify as male, and two identify as non-binary. We have 31 black / minority ethnic candidates in the sample, however due to the small N we are unable to say anything statistically about BME candidates experience of inappropriate behaviours. The data on BME candidates should be interpreted as descriptive only.

2. Topline insights

- 32% of candidates who have participated in the survey so far said they experienced some form of inappropriate behaviour during the 2017 general election campaign
- Women candidates were more likely to have experienced inappropriate behaviour
- Abuse of women candidates is not directed at any specific age group; women of all ages receive abuse
- 73% of candidates find abuse annoying, a majority (56%) are concerned, and 32% say they are fearful
- Sending inappropriate emails and abuse on social media are the most common types of inappropriate behaviour; physical attacks, thankfully, are rare
- 32% of candidates report inappropriate behaviour by supporters of opposition parties/candidates
- To increase candidate safety and improve the campaign environment, candidates suggested maintaining the anonymity of candidates' and agents' home addresses and ensuring appropriate and timely responses from police and political parties. They also suggest appropriate training on how to deal with harassment should be provided by parties and police.

3. Key findings

In this submission, we use *inappropriate behaviour* or *abuse* as general terms for a range of behaviours (e.g. assault, threats, harassment or unwanted approaches/contact).

1. Extent of inappropriate behaviours

To measure the extent of abuse during the campaign, we asked candidates: *During the 2017 General Election campaign, there were several press reports about candidates experiencing harassment and even security threats. Did you personally experience any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or threats to your security in your position as a parliamentary candidate during the election campaign?*

² James, D. V., Sukhwai, S., Farnham, F. R., Evans, J., Barrie, C., Taylor, A., & Wilson, S. P. (2016). Harassment and stalking of Members of the United Kingdom Parliament: associations and consequences. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 27(3), 309-330. We are grateful to David James for sharing his questions with us.

Just under one third (32%) of candidates said they had experienced some form of inappropriate behaviour during 2017 campaign. We find significant differences with respect to party and gender. As shown in Table 1, Conservative candidates were more likely to report experiencing inappropriate behaviour than candidates from any other party. Conservative candidates cited more general abuse, in particular, being called ‘Tory scum’.

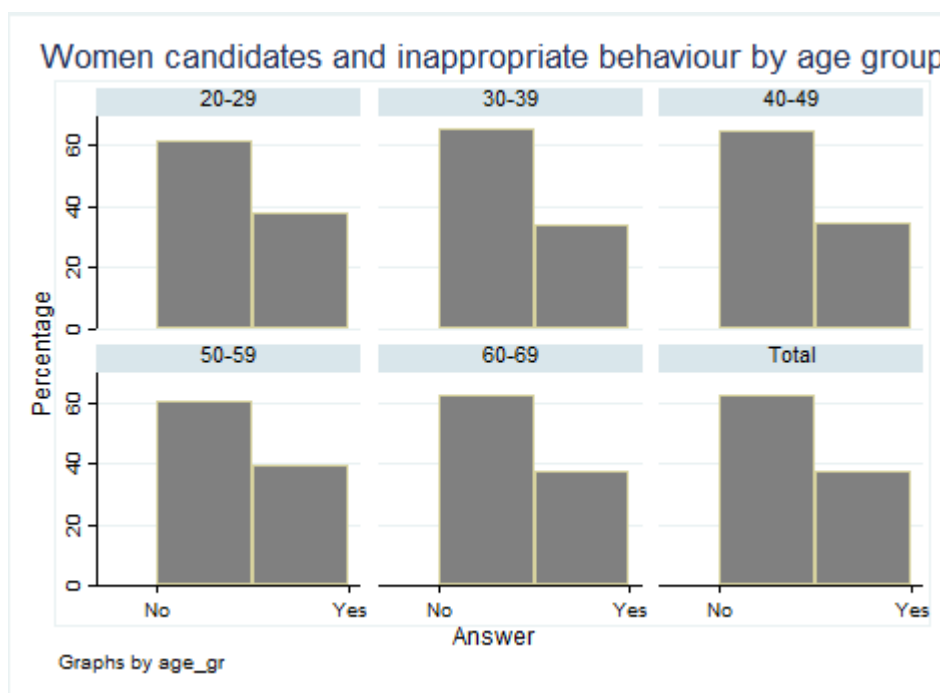
Table 1. Reports of inappropriate behaviour in the 2017 general election by party

	% No	% Yes	Total % (N)
Conservative	31 (29)	69 (65)	100 (94)
Labour	64 (110)	36 (61)	100 (171)
Liberal Democrat	76 (152)	24 (49)	100 (201)
SNP	38 (3)	62 (5)	100 (8)
Plaid Cymru	67 (4)	33 (2)	100 (6)
UKIP	59 (46)	41 (32)	100 (78)
Green	90 (145)	10 (16)	100 (161)
Total	68 (491)	32 (233)	100 (724)

(Percentage (N); Pearson χ^2 109.86; $p < .001$)

Women candidates (37%) were more likely to report being subject to inappropriate behaviour than men (30%). As shown in Figure 1, abuse occurs across all age groups and is not statistically more likely to be targeted at younger or older women candidates.

Figure 1. Percentage of women candidates reporting inappropriate behaviour by age group



Our sample contains 31 BME candidates, 7 (23%) of whom said they had experienced inappropriate behaviour.³ Of the 7 BME candidates who reported abusive behaviour, four are women.

We did not ask directly the extent to which people affiliated with the candidate's campaign were also targeted for abuse (see Table 3, item 2 that asks about abuse directed at the candidate or others close to them). However, in open text responses, we can illustrate how abuse extends to people in the candidate's sphere:

Some examples mentioned:

- "I received mildly harassing phone calls at all hours. A family member's car was keyed. I was not terribly distressed, but my husband was, which became a source of contention regarding standing for office"
- "The only incident that enraged me was the person who insulted my family and relatives. Others were vitriolic in their abuse and rabid in their hatred of all things Conservative and, although I accepted this, such behaviour distressed my wife"
- "Intrusive (illegible) is delivered to my home and being followed in a car"
- "A phone line was diverted home. My wife answered and a 14-15 year old girl, possibly encouraged by her father was aggressive and rude"
- "Aggressive behaviour towards my wife and another female campaigner"
- "References to where I live and my children and family mentioned, references to my daily routine"

Some insights from the open-ended questions:

- Candidates indicated that the most worrying abuse / events are those that include references to place of work, children and family
- Families, particularly spouses and partners, feel also threatened
- Harassment can become a source of contention with family regarding standing for office

2. Responses to inappropriate behaviour

We asked candidates the extent to which they felt *annoyed*, *concerned* or *fearful* in response to any inappropriate behaviour they encountered. Table 2 shows that 73% of candidates find abuse annoying, a majority (56%) are concerned, and 32% say they are fearful.

Table 2. Percentage of candidates who felt annoyed, concerned or fearful in response to abuse

	Annoyed	Concerned	Fearful
Not at all	4	16	39
Only a little	23	28	29
Moderately	31	39	21
Very	42	17	11
Total	100	100	100

³ Of the 7 BME candidates who reported abusive behaviour, four are women. Although our numbers for BME candidates are too small to draw any statistical inferences, we were keen to look at patterns of abuse for BME women candidates, following the Amnesty International report that BME women receive the lion's share of abuse (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/04/female-mps-sent-25000-abusive-twitter-messages-just-six-months/>).

Table 2a shows the percentage of candidates indicating they felt annoyed, concerned or fearful by gender. We find significant gender differences in candidates' responses to abuse.

Table 2a. Percentage of candidates who felt annoyed, concerned or fearful in response to abuse by gender

	Annoyed		Concerned		Fearful	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Not at all	5	1	20	7	46	27
Only a little	26	18	30	24	33	22
Moderately	34	26	36	43	14	33
Very	35	55	13	26	7	18
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

3. Types of inappropriate behaviour

We asked candidates about different types of inappropriate behaviours they may have experienced – ranging from being physically attacked, followed, inappropriate social media contact and sexual assault. As shown in Table 3, behaviours involving physical abuse/assault is rare. More frequent is abuse through sending inappropriate emails or contact on social media. This table also shows that significant party and gender differences are present. In every instance save sexual harassment we see significant differences among candidates of the different parties. With respect to gender, women candidates were more likely to be sexually harassed and to be sent inappropriate emails. Other recent studies (i.e. Amnesty International) have reported that women, and in particular, BME women receive the lion's share of abuse on social media. Our survey shows that 25% of women candidates report receiving 3 or more instances of abuse on social media compared to 18% of men, however, overall differences were not significant at standard significance levels ($p = .07$).

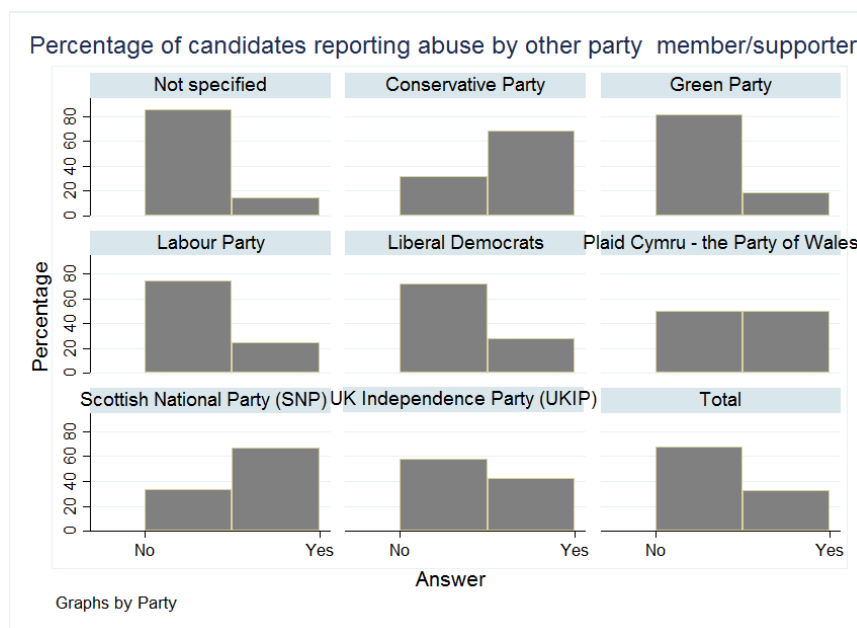
Table 3. Types of inappropriate behaviour

	Never	1-2 times	3+ times	Party differences	Gender differences
Physically attacked	98	2	0	Yes	No
Threats to harm you / others	90	8	2	Yes	No
Made unwanted approaches	88	8	3	Yes	No
Followed	96	3	1	Yes	No
Loitered at cand's home/other	96	3	1	Yes	No
Interfered with property	95	4	1	Yes	No
Sent inappropriate email	80	7	13	Yes	Yes
Inappropriate social media contact	76	4	20	Yes	No
Sent inappropriate letters	91	6	3	Yes	No
Made inappropriate phone calls	91	5	4	Yes	No
Sexually harassed	99	0	1	No	Yes
Sexually assaulted	100	0	0	No	No
Other	100	0	0	No	No

4. Sources of inappropriate behaviour

To gauge the extent to which inappropriate or abusive behaviour was between supporters of political parties, we asked: *During the 2017 General Election campaign, have you or your campaign experienced any inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties/ or candidates?* The data show that 32% of candidates report inappropriate behaviour by supporters of opposition parties/candidates. We do not observe gender differences, but once again, see significant party differences. Figure 2 shows the distribution of responses by political party. Some 68% of Conservative candidates said abuse came from opponents, compare to 28% for LibDems and 25% of Labour candidates.

Figure 2.



Our question asked about inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties, but in the open text questions, candidates identified several other sources of abuse. We are unable to quantify these, but illustrate the range with the text below. Several candidates noted that the political parties and candidates themselves are responsible for an abusive environment because they use aggressive rhetoric in their campaigns. Other candidates mentioned that social media companies are partially responsible because they should do more to identify members that behave aggressively. Respondents also mention that police should do more to respond to denunciations of harassment because the high levels of impunity have let this type of behaviour flourish. Other candidates identified the press as responsible for fostering harassment due to their aggressive and inadequate coverage of the campaign.

5. What should be done about harassment/intimidation?

Finally, in an open-ended question we asked candidates: *What measures, if any, should be taken to increase the security of election candidates?* We identify a range of responses below, in approximate order of the frequency with which they were mentioned.

- Maintain the option of anonymity of candidates' home addresses
- Serious and quick response from police; several candidates indicated that police are unsupportive, e.g. "don't make a fuss about this"
- Security advice from parties, police and other organizations
- Social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook etc.) should be forced to take action against trolls
- A special watchdog to investigate this type of abuse
- Ensure that candidates are accompanied in all moments while campaigning
- Stronger actions against offenders (e.g. including jail and fines)
- Parties should tell their members that this behaviour is unacceptable.

However, a few candidates felt that nothing can be done and this is something that comes with the territory of being a parliamentary candidate.

4. Summary

Our preliminary evidence shows that intimidation of parliamentary candidates is not limited to a few small cases. Just under one-third of candidates who have responded to our survey thus far report incidences of abuse or intimidation. From our early results, we find that women candidates are more likely to experience abuse, which is common across all age groups. Over half of candidates who experience inappropriate behaviour are concerned by it. Candidates offered a range of actions to address abuse: 1) maintaining the anonymity of candidates' and agents' home addresses and 2) prompt, appropriate responses by police, political parties and social media platforms, we among the most frequently identified.

Appendix

The Representative Audit of Britain (RAB) is funded by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC - ES/M500410/1). Following the 8 June General Election, the first wave of the survey of parliamentary candidates was fielded 17-29 July 2017 (N = 733). A second wave is currently in field and data collection is expected to finish December 2017.

Table A1. Number of candidates by political party

	Number	Per cent
Conservative	95	13
Labour	172	23
Liberal Democrat	201	27
SNP	8	1
Plaid Cymru	6	1
UKIP	80	11
Green	163	22
Not specified	8	1
Total	733	100

(Note: rounding to nearest percentage)

Question wording

Q3. During the 2017 General Election campaign, there were several press reports about candidates experiencing harassment and even security threats. Did you personally experience any form of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or threats to your security in your position as a parliamentary candidate during the election campaign?

If yes: Q3a. As a result of these behaviours, did you feel...annoyed, concerned, fearful

Q3b. If you were subjected to any form of inappropriate behaviour during the election campaign, which of the following forms of harassments / security threats did you experience? And how often did you experience such behaviour?

Has any person during the election campaign...

Q3c. If you experienced any inappropriate behaviour during the 2017 General Election campaign, which experience has affected you most?

Q4. What measures, if any, should be taken to increase the security of election candidates?

Q5. During the 2017 General Election campaign, have you or your campaign experienced any inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties/candidates?

Committee on Standards in Public Life review of Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates: Call for Evidence

Electoral Commission response

September 2017

Introduction

1. This paper sets out the Electoral Commission's response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's (CSPL) call for evidence on the Intimidation of Parliamentary candidates.
2. The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity. We work to support well-run elections and referendums in the UK, offering support and guidance to those involved, including political parties, candidates and non-party campaigners.
3. Through our regulation of political finance, we work to make sure people understand the rules and take proactive steps to increase transparency, ensure compliance and pursue breaches. This includes:
 - Registering political parties
 - Publishing information about donations and loans, parties' accounts and campaign spending
 - Providing advice and guidance to help people understand the party and election finance rules
 - Investigating allegations of non-compliance with the party and election finance rules
 - Advising government on proposed changes to the rules and making recommendations for change
4. While we have responsibilities to monitor and take all reasonable steps relating to compliance with the candidate expenses and donations rules at elections, investigations into alleged breaches by individual candidates and related prosecutions under the Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA) are the responsibility of the police and prosecutors. Similarly, police forces are responsible

for investigating specific allegations of abusive or intimidating behaviour directed towards candidates or other campaigners in order to determine whether offences may have been committed.

5. The Electoral Commission is committed to the United Kingdom's strong tradition of free elections, which are an essential part of a healthy democracy. It is important that people should be able to stand for election and campaign without the fear of abuse or intimidation. We do not believe it would be appropriate for the Commission to investigate specific allegations or incidences of intimidation of parliamentary candidates, given the existing role and responsibilities of police forces and prosecuting bodies and the Commission's role in overseeing and regulating the UK's political finance rules.

6. Our submission responds to four specific questions included in the call for evidence which are relevant to the Commission's role and experience:

1. What is the nature and degree of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates, in particular at the 2017 General Election?

4. Is existing legislation sufficient to address intimidation of Parliamentary candidates?

5. What role should political parties play in preventing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates and encouraging constructive debate?

6. What other measures might be effective in addressing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, and candidates for public offices more broadly?

7. Our response draws on themes and issues highlighted in feedback that we received in response to a survey of candidates at the June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election, as well as responses from a similar survey carried out with candidates at the May 2017 Scottish local council elections.

1. What is the nature and degree of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates, in particular at the 2017 General Election?

8. Following the announcement of the June 2017 UK Parliamentary general election we were contacted by the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Anti-Semitism who asked us to collate information about any issues relating to the abuse of candidates in order to update their [2013 inquiry into electoral conduct](#). After the election on 8 June, we passed on information about a small number of issues that had been reported to the Commission during the campaign, and these were reflected in the Group's July 2017 report: [All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry Into Electoral Conduct: Final Update](#).

9. Also after the election, we undertook a survey of candidates to understand their experiences of standing for election, as we have done at previous elections. This

was the first year that we asked candidates about intimidation and we therefore hold no comparative data from previous years.

10. Of the 3,304 candidates who stood, we received feedback from 780 candidates (24%). From this total, 13 responses included references to issues of intimidation, and we have summarised below the themes highlighted in those responses. To encourage honest feedback, in both the survey and interviews, the Commission assured candidates that any information supplied would remain confidential. The comments highlighted below therefore seek not to identify any individuals.

11. Four responses raised general concerns that intimidation had taken place, including posters being ripped down and vandalised, false allegations made over the internet and malicious statements made about candidates, but they did not provide any specific examples or details.

12. Five responses identified what appeared to involve first-hand experience of intimidation:

- Two respondents said that they had been intimidated and received threats at their own homes.
- One respondent said they were harassed by attendees at the count.
- One respondent said they were subjected to covert and overt bullying, dirty tricks and misogyny.
- One respondent said that another candidate was rude and aggressive to them at the count.

13. The remaining four responses highlighted concerns that others had experienced intimidation: two respondents said that their tellers had been subject to intimidation and abuse; one respondent said that one of their volunteers had been assaulted delivering leaflets; and one respondent said that attempts had been made to intimidate other candidates in order to make them stand down.

14. Following the May 2017 Scottish council elections, we issued a survey to candidates, and additionally conducted some in-depth interviews. Of the 2,572 candidates who stood for election, we received survey feedback from 796 (31%). References to intimidation were made by eight respondents across the survey and interviews. We have summarised below the themes highlighted in those responses.

15. Three responses raised general concerns relating to online threats, attempted intimidation and threats made by one candidate to another who opposed them, and a perceived general increase in the threat towards politicians. No specific examples or details were provided in these cases.

16. Four responses identified what appeared to involve first-hand experience of intimidation:

- One respondent said that they felt very intimidated before the election and were verbally abused by party activists from another party.

- One respondent said that they were told not to attend candidate meetings and that they were bullied online by former members of their own party, with misleading statements being made about them during the campaign.
- One respondent said that activists for another party were telling voters outside polling stations not to vote for them, as well as making threatening and harassing statements in the press and on social media.
- One respondent noted they had experienced intimidating and threatening behaviour whilst out campaigning.

17. One further response highlighted concerns that campaigners from another party were being derogatory about people from their own party at the count.

4. Is existing legislation sufficient to address intimidation of Parliamentary candidates?

6. What other measures might be effective in addressing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, and candidates for public offices more broadly?

18. Our response addresses questions 4 and 6 together. There is currently no specific electoral legislation that seeks to address the intimidation of candidates at UK elections; however, there are a range of offences set out in electoral law, primarily in the Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA 1983) that relate to conduct during elections. Many of these offences have not been properly reviewed or updated since they were first created (in the 1800s or earlier) and many, as well as being out of date, contain highly complex drafting and are spread over many different pieces of legislation.

19. The UK's Law Commissions have recently reviewed electoral laws and have proposed reforms to update, simplify and consolidate them (see Chapter 11 of their [2016 Interim Report](#)). Implementing these proposals would make it easier for everyone to understand and comply with these laws, and for the police and prosecutors to enforce them. The Electoral Commission therefore continues to urge the UK Government to do so. This reform project would also present an opportunity to consider whether, in addition to clarifying and strengthening existing offences, there are any gaps in the law where additional offences may be useful.

20. For example, section 115 of the RPA 1983 specifies an offence of exerting undue influence on voters (for example, by threatening or using violence) – this is a particularly complex provision that the Law Commission proposes to reform. There is no similar offence relating to the intimidation of candidates. It may be that there is no need for such an offence as the general criminal law might be sufficient. While it is beyond the Commission's expertise and remit to comment on the sufficiency of the general criminal law, it may be useful for the CSPL review to seek expert advice from police forces and prosecutors.

21. In some instances, electoral law does specify offences in respect of behaviour that could also amount to an offence under the general criminal law. This is often because electoral offences have special consequences, in that their commission could invalidate the election result and result in the person convicted losing their elected office and/or being subject to a period of disqualification from being registered as an elector, voting in an election and standing for election (section 173 RPA 1983). It may be that similar special electoral consequences could act as a deterrent to abusive behaviour in relation to candidates and campaigners.

22. A further current offence under electoral law which it may be useful to consider is that of making false statements of fact about the personal character or conduct of a candidate (section 106 RPA 1983). As the Law Commissions' noted in their [2014 electoral law reform consultation paper](#), "Any person can commit this offence, but it is plainly targeted at rival candidates and those affiliated to their campaign". The Law Commissions also noted that Section 106(3) expressly provides that a person making or publishing any false statement of fact may be restrained by interim or perpetual injunction.

23. One specific reform that the Electoral Commission has recommended since 2003 – and which the Law Commissions have also proposed – is to update the law so that it takes appropriate account of online material, including social media. There is currently a requirement to include an 'imprint' on printed 'election material' (defined as material intended to promote or procure the election of a candidate) (section 110 RPA 1983). This is important to ensure campaigners are accountable for spending on regulated campaign material, but it also allows members of the public to identify who is responsible for the material. The Electoral Commission and the Law Commissions have recommended that the imprint requirement should be extended to online material.

5. What role should political parties play in preventing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates and encouraging constructive debate?

24. The Electoral Commission has worked with registered political parties since 2004 to develop and agree a [voluntary Code of Conduct for Campaigners](#) in relation to electoral registration, postal voting, proxy voting and polling stations, which provides a guide for campaigners, electoral administrators and police forces to what is, and is not, considered acceptable behaviour at polling stations and in the community during the lead-up to polling day. This includes guidance about acceptable campaign activity near to polling stations, but does not include provisions relating to the content of campaign speech or material.

25. We support the important role of campaigners in encouraging people to participate in elections and referendums. It is equally important, however, to ensure that the activities of campaigners do not bring into question the integrity of the electoral process. Although political parties cannot be held wholly responsible for the actions of all their supporters – particularly those who are not candidates or party members – we continue to argue that registered political parties and candidates can

still do more to take responsibility for the actions of their supporters to prevent electoral fraud.

26. We encourage political parties to incorporate compliance with the Code of Conduct for Campaigners into their own existing internal codes and disciplinary processes for their members and candidates, and we have seen evidence that some parties have taken action against members who are found to have breached the Code.

27. As reflected in our response to [Sir Eric Pickles' review and recommendations](#) on electoral fraud we will continue to assess the effectiveness of the voluntary Code of Conduct for Campaigners and consider any new evidence which suggests that the introduction of new offences is necessary to address a significant vulnerability.

28. We will also continue to support Returning Officers and political parties to identify when campaigners have breached the agreed Code of Conduct for Campaigners and to take action to prevent repeated breaches – including encouraging political parties to take disciplinary action themselves against any of their members who have breached the Code.

29. While the Code of Conduct for Campaigners does not include provisions which are directly relevant to the CSPL's current enquiry, we would be happy to provide further information about how we review and monitor the effectiveness of the Code including seeking input and buy-in from political parties.

Radio 5 Live survey: abuse of MPs at the 2017 General Election

Number of respondents - 113 MPs

77 men

36 women

Con - 47

Lab - 45

SNP - 10

Other - 11

(results by number of respondents, not percentages)

Q1: During the General Election campaign 2017 did you experience verbal abuse?

Yes – 76

No – 35

Don't know/No answer - 2

Q2: If you answered yes, where did it come from? Please tick all that apply.

From another political party – 41

From my own party – 5

From the general public – 50

Don't know – 5

Q3: During the General Election campaign 2017 did you experience online abuse?

Yes – 89

No – 21

Don't know/No Answer - 3

Q4: If you answered yes, who was it from? Please tick all that apply.

From another political party – 61

From my own party – 10

From the general public – 60

Don't know – 6

Q5: During the General Election campaign 2017 did you experience physical abuse?

Yes – 10

No – 99

Don't know/No Answer – 4

Q6: If you answered yes, who was responsible? Please tick all that apply.

Someone from another political party – 2

Someone from my own party – 0

A member of the public – 8

Don't know – 1

Q7: During the General Election campaign 2017 did you experience physical abuse to any property?

Yes – 43

No – 66

Don't know/No Answer – 4

Q8: If you answered yes, who was responsible? Please tick all that apply

Someone from another political party – 20

Someone from my own party – 0

A member of the public – 10

Don't know – 23

Q9: What effect did abuse have on you during the campaign? Please tick one.

I was extremely upset by the level of abuse I received – 9

I was fairly upset by the abuse – 38

The abuse didn't bother me – 37

Q10: Considering the level of abuse, would you recommend standing as a candidate to other people?

Yes – 67

No – 19

Don't know – 18

Q11: How do you think the level of abuse you received compared to other General Election campaigns?

It's the worst I've ever experienced – 58

It was comparable to other General Elections – 30

It was less than previous General Elections – 11

I have never stood in a General Election before – 6

Don't know – 2

Q12: Is there a difference in the level of abuse aimed at male and female candidates?

Men receive more – 1

Women receive more – 71

There's no difference – 10

Don't know – 27

Lisa Cameron MP

During the election 2017, I experienced a number of issues of abuse, intimidation and harassment that did not arise during the 2015 campaign. This included incidents experienced both online and in person and had the effect of being emotionally upsetting, at times frightening and traumatic and made me significantly question why I was putting myself and my family through the process of my standing for election.

I spoke out in parliament on 12/7/17 about my experiences of antisemitism, defamatory statements made about the validity of my professional qualification as a doctor, abusive comments levied at myself and my husband online (including on Facebook and local community websites), defamatory statements claiming I engage in private business contracts with the NHS, all designed to undermine my professional and political standing. This type of campaigning is designed to distress, intimidate and psychologically traumatise candidates. It has the desired effect and may put candidates off standing, particularly women, fundamentally undermining democracy.

I only had two minutes to speak in the Westminster Hall debate on 12/7/17 and so was unable to cover all of my experiences at this time. During the election campaign, I also experienced sustained verbal abuse levied at me during candidates meetings which was not controlled by the chairs of these meetings. I was expected to return to this type of meeting on subsequent occasions which left me feeling intimidated by those in attendance who had previously been abusive. They were never disciplined to my knowledge despite the issues being reported.

Since speaking out about my experiences on 12/7/17, one of the individuals who was involved, wrote to SNP to complain about my speaking in parliament in the Westminster Hall debate stating that I should not have spoken out about these issues. I was extremely shocked by this, as it infers that individuals who experience abuse should remain silent and not speak about it in parliament. It suggests that the behaviour referred to is acceptable and further victimises those who have the courage to speak out.

The General Election is a busy time but I received no formal response or support within this period. It is important to me that all parties establish clear guidelines for tackling abuse and supporting candidates who experience and report this. Otherwise it normalises abuse within politics. I would have felt a benefit from support and would suggest:-

1. all reported incidents of racism/antisemitism including verbal comments are taken seriously and responded to
2. all reported incidents of abuse or harassment are taken seriously and responded to
3. candidates should receive substantive party support emotionally/and in terms of maintaining physical security. They should not be expected to return to meetings where they have been bullied or abused
4. MP's staff who are abused during election periods should receive substantive support emotionally via HR and guidance in terms of maintaining physical security
5. All cross party leaders must condemn abuse of candidates/MPs and act when informed of actions by their members. They should investigate and discipline those involved. Talking about abuse whilst failing to act is not good enough.
6. There should be a formal mechanism for response and support to candidates who experience and report abuse to their party during the election campaign.

If we work cross-party on these issues, I am sure we can make a difference and ensure inclusion in parliament. I am also heartened to learn that the Inter Parliamentary Union are currently undertaking a study into abuse of female MPs and that this will also be taken forward by the Council of Europe. Perhaps international guidance or resolutions can be agreed. I would like to also contribute to their studies into this issue to improve the future experience of candidates.

Kind regards,

Lisa

Dr Lisa Cameron MP"

Review into Intimidation of Candidates at the General Election 2017
Written Submission: Scottish National Party
October 2017

19 October 2017

Call for Evidence Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates

Dear Lord Bew,

Please find below a submission recording the Scottish National Party's experience of candidate intimidation during the General Election 2017 and our views on the matter. The SNP would like to take this opportunity to be clear that the intimidation and abuse of candidates and elected members is not solely confined to election periods.

Nature of the Problem

1. The nature of the problem is extensive. Abuse reaches candidates and Members through multiple channels, including Twitter, Facebook and email. The ability to monitor, block or report abuse varies depending on the platform used. The response to abuse through these different channels also varies. Notably, candidates and Members do not report this same level of abuse in person from constituents or members of the public when performing their duties, holding surgeries, appearing at hustings etc. The anonymity provided by social media and other online forms of communication appears to give the confidence to certain people to make abusive comments without fear or exposure or legal action.
2. The abuse received is multi-faceted. While all candidates and Members can be at the receiving end, it particularly targets candidates who are Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME), LGBT, women or disabled. Candidates feel overwhelmed as abuse can be directed because they are some of these things, because they may be all of these things, because they are one of these things, or two of these things.
3. The quantity of abusive messages can be so vast it's difficult to count them all. At points where a candidate or Member is taking part in a TV broadcast or high visibility campaign event the abuse will be at its peak. Amnesty International's report '*Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs*' (published September 2017) identified SNP Members as receiving on average 0.8 abusive tweets per day. The report also showed SNP MP Joanna Cherry QC as receiving the third largest amount of the most abusive tweets in the six weeks prior to the 2017 snap election.
4. The content of the abuse can vary from vile to uncomfortable. It must be made clear that any abuse will not be tolerated and will be actioned. SNP candidates received abusive tweets which ranged from sexist, homophobic and racist. In some instances the abuse included more than one of those things. While any form of abuse can be disturbing, the threats of sexual violence made against female candidates in particular, are something that any reasonable person would expect social media platforms to act on.
5. Social media platforms give a legacy effect to the abuse. The profile of candidates and Members remains active and they do, long after holding office, still receive abusive

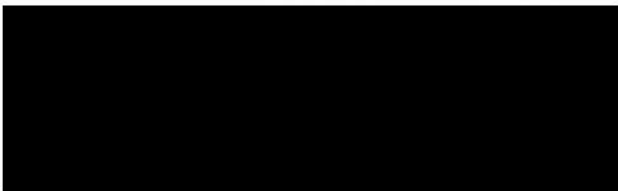
messages. Many of these will be known perpetrators who have identified a candidate or Member and will continue to abuse them no matter their position in political life.

6. ANNEX 1 – Examples of some of the abuse received by just one SNP Member/candidate.

Recommendations for Action

1. The SNP welcomes Amnesty International's report '*Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs*' published September 2017. We urge both Twitter and Facebook to invest more resources in enforcing transparent reporting mechanisms for candidates and Members. In addition, Twitter and Facebook staff – in all departments – must be trained about the various ways online abuse grows on the platforms.
2. The SNP would like to share good practice through our Social Media team's Community Managers. Our dedicated staff work to 'hide' abusive comments on Facebook. The platform's 'hide' button enables candidates and Members to get rid of abusive messages so that others cannot join in or add to the stream. However, Twitter is much more difficult to monitor or 'hide' abusive messages.
3. We encourage political parties to have Candidate Liaison Teams in elections. This can be an important support for new candidates and those who receive distressing messages or threats which need actioned through criminal proceedings.
4. Community police officers should also be fully trained in providing support for individuals receiving large amounts of online abuse or threats against them and their family. Regular contact and on-going support can create a level of confidence and protection for the victim.
5. The SNP call on the UK government to ensure that any response to this issue recognises online abuse against women as an extension of existing offline discrimination and abuse against women.

Yours sincerely,

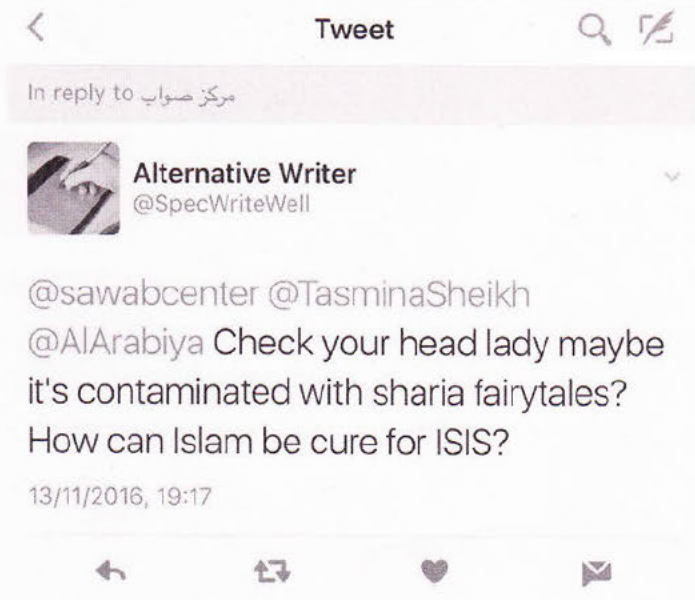
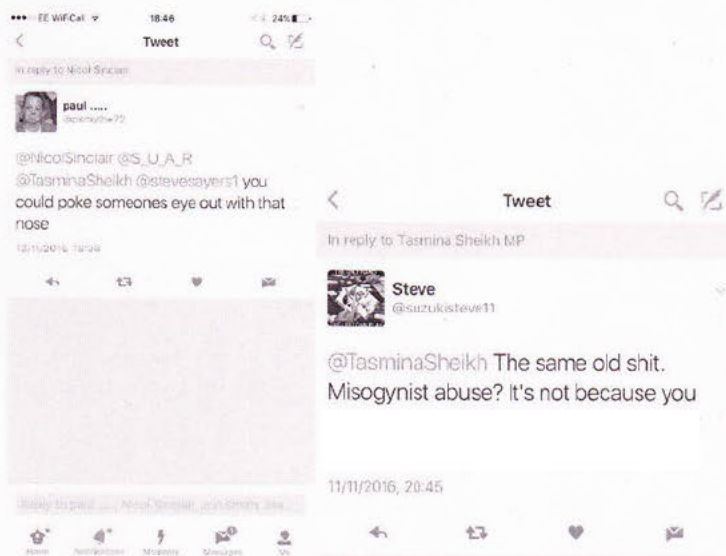
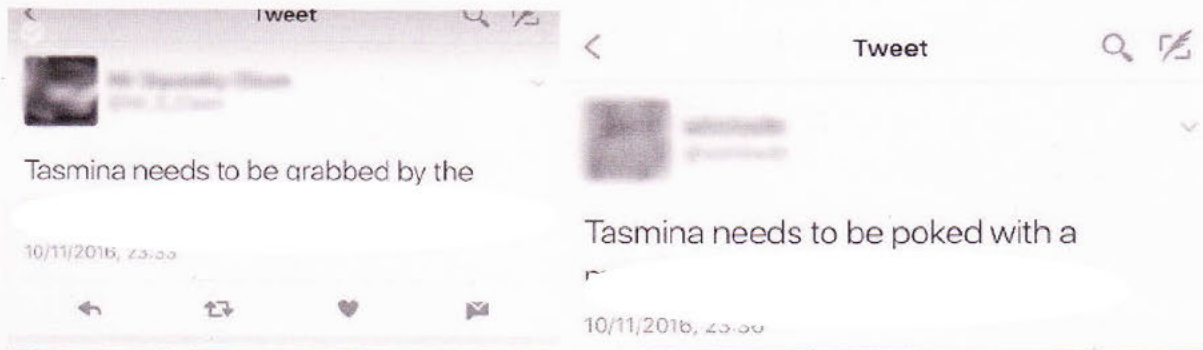


Ian Blackford MP

SNP WESTMINSTER LEADER

Review into Intimidation of Candidates at the General Election 2017
Written Submission: Scottish National Party
October 2017

ANNEX 1



Diane Abbott MPs Office - Monitoring Abuse - Post, Emails and Social Media

Dear [REDACTED]

Please see some details below on how we monitor and report abuse in our office and the ridiculous amount of time it takes. We are happy for you to use this information in whichever way you feel best.

Emails and letters

The amount of abuse we receive in our office via email and post varies, however the reporting process remains very time consuming and fruitless. It is the policy in our office that only one member of staff opens the post, this is following requests for DNA by the police to investigate these crimes. This often means that post takes longer to sort and requires us to wear gloves and place letters in to evidence bags. We normally collate these for a week or two week before reporting so as not to have to lodge numerous individual complaints or have the police having to come to the office every other day.

There was a time that we would simply throw away abusive letter because the reporting process was so cumbersome with no results. However over the past few years they have become more frequent, more vile and we are concerned for Ms. Abbotts safety.

We take a similar approach of when dealing with email abuse. We sort abuse into dated folders, which again we forward on to the police once a fortnight.

Social media

On average 3 different members of staff block 15 to 30 people each on Facebook and Twitter per day, delete the same amount of inappropriate comments and abusive content.

Often we have to contend with whole pages on Facebook dedicated to abusing Diane. There are 2 staff members that dedicate time to reporting and cleaning as and when required.

Our Youtube channel is least targeted with on average of 5 abusive comments per week. 20 channels have been reported in the past year for regular abuse of Diane. For YouTube we report abuse monthly example attached (instances in September)

Over the past 8 months, we have had one staff member who has dedicated alot of their time in the office working on cleaning up and reporting social media. She currently spends 2-3 hours per day , deleting, blocking and reporting on Facebook/Twitter and YouTube.



Do let me know if you need any further information.

Kind regards,

Political Advisor to The Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP

Labour Member of Parliament for Hackney North and Stoke Newington &

Shadow Home Secretary

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Do let me know if you need any further information.

Kind regards,

Political Advisor to The Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP

Labour Member of Parliament for Hackney North and Stoke Newington & Shadow Home Secretary

Staff overview of abuse faced by Diane Abbott

We are happy for you to use this information in whichever way you find the most impactful.

We take any decision to speak out very seriously because we know what it can bring. For example in response to Diane making her comments in Westminster Hall on abuse attached are just some of the emails we've received.

Given what we have to look at on a daily basis staff in our office were quite upset by the Westminster Hall debate that was called by the Conservative party. It appeared to make abuse look unique to this election and aimed primarily at Conservative members of Parliament! We believe that the abuse that women and BME MPs Labour, Tory, SNP and otherwise receive is disgusting and distressing. And it certainly not limited to the General Election. As Diane said in that same debate the abuse she has received is not the preserve of any party or faction. We won't bring it to an end by attempting to 'score points' this way.

Examples of abuse include Diane's head being superimposed onto an animals. Its usually animals *or* pornographic images. One Christmas some sick person created an account in Diane's name and emailed Member of Parliaments and many members of Parliamentary staff with a pornographic image with Diane's face superimposed.

I've asked past and present staff and the scariest/worst thing and we unanimously agree that it is the death threats. Variations on hanging, shooting or in some other horrible way killing her. Diane is one of the most recognised politicians in the country. Her address was published by a newspaper. Something else we have reported. As you can imagine this creates growing concern for her safety when she travels alone and the safety of members of her staff who accompany her to various events. We are also more recently aware of successful attempts at either finding or prosecuting individuals that have made the similar threats to other Members of Parliament. For example someone was arrested last year after tweeting at Anna Soubry MP "someone Jo Cox Anna Soubry please" and rightfully so. But we see things like this far too often.

When see these things we have to make judgements as to whether the police will think they are 'serious' enough to investigate. Given previous experience we generally delete abusive messages, block people and throw away letters. But this is a very busy office and with the proliferation of social media it's near impossible to keep up. So we collate the abuse and save it for a time when we can file a report.

Someone has put together a collection of some of the social media abuse and the second link is from the BBC of Diane discussing it herself:

· <https://tompride.wordpress.com/2016/10/07/uk-today-disgusting-torrent-of-racist-and-sexist-abuse-unleashed-at-uks-first-black-woman-mp/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36352543>

In all honesty this is not even the worst of it we read a lot of horrible things in the course of our work but the past couple of years have been particularly disturbing.

The press are a major problem. Diane has become click bait and some publications are obsessed with her namely the Express (who during the election were ridiculous one day writing 4 stories), the Daily Mail and the Sun. Bar a few occasions they did not ask us for a comment. Poor press regulation means that unless we are prepared to pay lawyers each time, most publications seem free to print mistruths about Diane which only increases the level of abuse we receive on a given day. And their regulator IPSO does nothing.

More recently other Members of Parliament have come out in support, but actually some of them are part of the problem. They are free to taunt and even swear at Diane and it appears to earn them wide/favourable press coverage. If the message from the media and the highest echelons of the political elite is, "you can say what you like about Diane Abbott" is it any surprise members of the general public think it's acceptable behaviour. As Diane put very poignantly it's about the degradation of public discourse. Sadly the most influential in society are abusing their positions and are leading the way.

As one publication said at the beginning of the year "it is open season on Diane Abbott". Do we have to wait for something more serious to happen to her before people realise this is a problem that needs to be dealt with? A lot of the abuse is online and the solution from the companies is for us to just 'block it' so we don't have to see it. But that doesn't stop the abuse being there and is not a satisfactory response to receiving abuse. No doubt seeing another black person or woman being abused can have an impact on those who relate. I understand racism in modern society and I even expect it, but I am the staff member that wasn't expecting to read the N – word so much in the daily course of my work for a Member of Parliament, regardless of the colour of her skin.

I've worked for Diane longer than everyone else currently in our office so my ideas of a life in politics are well and truly tainted. But what really made me sad was hearing what one of our younger members of staff a bright and fantastic young woman said to me just after the general election. She said no way would she want to be an MP. The level of abuse she felt she'd receive as a BAME woman was too much. This is the legacy of the abuse aimed at Diane Abbott.

Do let me know if you need any further information.

Kind regards,

Political Advisor to The Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP

Labour Member of Parliament for Hackney North and Stoke Newington &

Shadow Home Secretary

Review of Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates*Committee on Standards in Public Life**By email: public@public-standards.gov.uk*

4 October 2017

Dear Lord Bew,

CALL FOR EVIDENCE: INTIMIDATION OF PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES

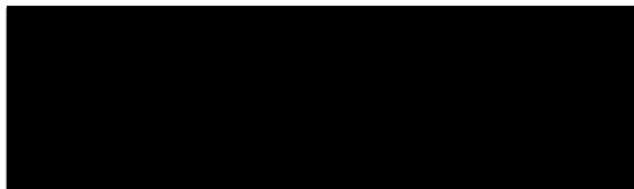
Thank you for your letter of 22 September and for the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee. I would suggest that the evidence session illustrated there was a cross-party consensus on the fact there is a growing problem that needs to be addressed, and there were a number of policy proposals which were commonly supported. I hope your report will highlight areas where there is already consensus, as well as helping bridge further agreement on practical measures that should be undertaken.

You asked for information about Conservative Party members being disciplined for intimidation of candidates during the general election. The Party has a complaints procedure which is available to anyone who is concerned about abuse, including online and social media abuse. It is run through CCHQ and available online. However, no complaints about abuse against candidates were logged by CCHQ during the general election period in 2017 (consequently, no disciplinary action was undertaken).

More broadly, there have been approximately 20 suspensions in the last 12 months (either carried out locally or centrally), some of which led to subsequent expulsions, that relate directly to inappropriate social media use. None of these have related to the intimidation of other candidates, as such.

I hope this information is useful, and illustrates that the Conservative Party has an effective disciplinary process which it is willing to use. Notwithstanding, as I highlighted in my written evidence, I do not believe that the growing problem of intimidation, and the volume of it, stems from party members. The abuse is principally from extremes of the political spectrum, and by social media accounts which are frequently anonymous or operate under a false name.

Yours sincerely,



Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP
*Chairman of the Conservative Party &
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster*

By email to public@public-standards.gov.uk

Dear Lord Bew

Review of Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates

At the hearing on 14 September you asked for the parties to provide further information on the number and course of action that are taken against members who harass candidates from other parties.

Since 2014 the Liberal Democrats have operated an online complaints system, which comes directly to our Pastoral Care Officer, who will take up each case and ensure that it is referred to the relevant part of the party. Our complaints system doesn't distinguish between the type of complaint, so it has proved difficult to get accurate figures on the specific harassment of candidates from other parties, whether for the General Election or local elections.

The party is clear that members have both rights and responsibilities which are summarised on our website [https://www.libdems.org.uk/complaints_member_rights_responsibilities] (attached as Appendix 1). All members of the party are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct [<https://www.libdems.org.uk/doc-code-of-conduct>] (attached as Appendix 2). These two documents are used as the basis for taking the appropriate action against members who breach the Code.

Resolutions for disciplinary cases include expulsion from the party; ban on standing for or holding elected office (either public or internal); a period of retraining and mentoring during which their membership is kept on review; or clearing them of the allegations. In the more serious cases the party will suspend the member pending a hearing. Increasingly, we also look at patterns of behaviour, particularly relevant in cases of social media harassment, where one incident on its own might not be enough to trigger a full investigation, but a number of small complaints together demonstrate a problem.

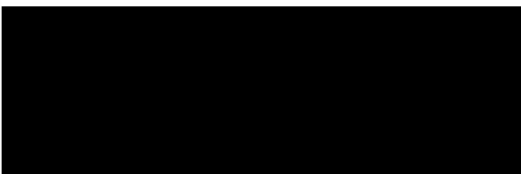
We started to log formally our complaints system from 2014, and over the three year period the Pastoral Care Officer has received 386 complaints about the behaviour of party members. The number of complaints so far in 2017 is 31, compared with 55 for 2016. The behaviour described by complainants tends to range from inappropriate behaviour, harassment and general rudeness and also includes behaviour on social media. Complaints on social media behaviour to date in 2017 are 26, compared with 104 in 2016, but it is worth noting that in 2016 the majority of the complaints

(77) related to two individuals, neither remain in the party one was expelled and the other resigned before the m. If you remove complaints about these two people the 2016 complaints figure is 27. We would note that there has been no spike in complaints of social media use during elections periods.

So far in 2017 the number of members expelled or suspended because of their behaviour (including social media) is 11, but it is not clear how many of these are for behaviour against members of other parties.

I hope that this is helpful information, and wish to reassure you that the Liberal Democrats take seriously any complaints against members of the party, and that our processes ensure that where a case is proven, we will take action. Please let me know if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,



Baroness Sal Brinton
President of the Liberal Democrats

My rights & responsibilities

Your Rights

- **You have the right to be treated with respect**

This applies to all members, staff, and volunteers. Treating others with respect includes not bullying, harassing, or intimidating them. It also means, at the most basic level, treating others as you would wish to be treated.

- **You have the right to be treated equally**

The Liberal Democrats will not discriminate as to age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, or sex.

- **You have the right to be treated fairly**

This is in regard to all aspects of Party life – from the workings of your local party to your dealings with Federal bodies, committees, and members of staff.

- **You have the right to be treated within the party rules**

All action that the party takes towards you will be within its own rules. These can be found in the Federal and State Constitutions, in each State Party's membership rules, and in additional operational documents.

- **You have the right to make a complaint in confidence**

Any complaint you make will be treated on a 'need to know' basis, and no information will be passed on without your consent.

Your Responsibilities

- **You have the responsibility to treat others with respect**

As a member, you have a responsibility not to bully, harass, or intimidate other members, volunteers, party employees, members of the Parliamentary staff, or members of the public.

- **You have the responsibility to treat others without bias**

The Liberal Democrats reject all prejudice and discrimination, and are opposed to all forms of entrenched privilege and inequality. As a Liberal Democrat, you will not discriminate as to age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, or sex.

- **You have the responsibility not to bring the party into disrepute**

'Bringing the party into disrepute' refers to your behaviour both as a Liberal Democrat and as an individual. You should never behave in a way which could negatively impact the reputation of the Party if your behaviour was to be made public.

Appendix 2

Members' Code of Conduct

The Members' Code of Conduct was approved by the Federal Executive on the 7th March 2014.

Our Constitution begins with these words:

'The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. We champion the freedom, dignity and well-being of individuals, we acknowledge and respect their right to freedom of conscience and their right to develop their talents to the full,'

This applies as much to the internal working of our party as to the type of society we wish to build.

As a member you have the right to be treated fairly, equally, and within the bounds of party rules. You also have the responsibility to behave in a way that does not negatively impact other members, staff, volunteers, people who interact with the Party in a professional capacity, or the party's reputation.

We encourage robust and passionate debate on policy, strategy and the way in which the party functions. We also expect our members to behave lawfully and honestly, to be sensitive to other people's feelings and respect their right to have and express different views to their own.

Our responsibilities as party members apply not only to our personal conduct but also to our conduct in communications, including electronic ones and with the media in all its forms.

Here is a checklist of questions you should ask yourself as you act internally or externally:

- Could what I am intending to do or say or write (in any format) be taken as intimidation, harassment or bullying?

- Am I acting in the party's best interests?
- Am I declaring all my interests if asked to make such a declaration?
- Is what I am doing compliant with electoral law?
- Is what I'm doing compliant with data protection law and the party's data protection standards?
- Can we afford what I am planning to do?
- Is what I'm doing in line with our constitution and rules?

If you are unsure about any of these then take advice before acting. Your local party officers, regional officers and national officers are there to help and interpret. They can act as sounding boards for any action. Our staff at local, regional and national level are there to support you and are the appropriate sources of expertise on all legal and constitutional requirements.

We do need to make it clear that behaviour which is unlawful, dishonest, deceitful, violent, or threatening will constitute bringing the Party into disrepute, will constitute grounds for disciplinary action under the Party Constitution. We should also remind you that the party reserves the right to refer any breach of this code of conduct which breaks the criminal law to the police rather than/ as well as dealing with it under this code of conduct.

Our hope is that we never have to do this. With your support we can challenge others who seem to be acting against the spirit of this code and support those who are role models. In this way we can ensure that we encourage the best in ourselves to thrive and grow.

Latest data update 30th of October 2018 but we have received very few new surveys since then. 964 responses (34% response rate).

1. Candidates who experienced any kind of harassment
 - a. 32% of candidates affirm to have suffered any form of harassment.
2. Cut by party

Table 1 Harassment by party

Party		No	Yes	Total
Not specified	n	2	3	5
	%	40	60	100
Conservative Party	n	38	80	118
	%	32.2	67.8	100
Green Party	n	196	21	217
	%	90.32	9.68	100
Labour Party	n	146	83	229
	%	63.76	36.24	100
Liberal Democrats	n	186	63	249
	%	74.7	25.3	100
Plaid Cymru - the Par	n	10	8	18
	%	55.56	44.44	100
Scottish National Par	n	4	10	14
	%	28.57	71.43	100
UK Independence Party	n	67	38	105
	%	63.81	36.19	100
Total	n	649	306	955
	%	67.96	32.04	100

3. %/N who say they are fearful

Table 2 Feelings: Fearful

Felt fearful	n	%
Not at all	105	39.77
Only a little	78	29.55
Moderately or very concerned	81	30.68
Total	264	100

4. %/N who say they are concerned

Table 3 Feelings: Concerned

Concerned	n	%
Not at all	45	16.48
Only a little	75	27.47
Moderately or very concerned	153	56.04
Total	273	100

5. %/N candidates who say they have been harassed (any form) by other parties

Table 4 Total figure (all candidates)

Inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties/candidates	n	%
No	634	66.74
Yes	316	33.26
Total	950	100

Table 5 Only candidates who suffered harassment

Inappropriate behaviour by supporters of other parties/candidates	n	%
No	105	34.88
Yes	196	65.12
Total	301	100