Chapter Five

‘Keep Your Head Down and Shut Up’ – Exploring the Seven Elements of Online Abuse

Abstract

This chapter introduces the empirical research undertaken with women working in academia, journalism, policing and politics. It outlines the seven elements of online abuse, which were found to be present (in whole or in part) in every instance of online abuse. These are defamation, emotional harm, harassment, threat, silencing women’s voices, belittling and undermining women and the criticism of individuals’ appearance and other physical characteristics. Each of these seven elements is further analysed using the empirical evidence provided in the testimony gained from 50 semi-structured interviews with women serving in public facing occupations.

Keywords: Defamation; emotional harm; harassment; threat; silencing; belittling; appearance; age

Introduction

This chapter introduces empirical evidence of online abuse gathered from women working in the public sphere. There are two types of research material presented here: ‘traditional’ qualitative data drawn from 50 semi-structured interviews carried out with women working within academia, journalism, policing and politics and the qualitative analysis of a Twitter corpus that was collected in real-time between January and June 2020. Combined, these data provide a detailed account of the realities of engaging professionally in the online space.

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Chapter Three established a coalescence between theories of gender-based violence and online abuse, leading to the identification of six pervasive elements of online abuse: emotional harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2018), harassment (Bailey & Burkell, 2021), threat (Jane, 2014b; McGlynn et al., 2017), belittling (Camp, 2018), silencing (Galpin, 2022) and criticism of appearance (Backe et al., 2018). This chapter provides further evidence of the presence of these six elements in every episode of online abuse and, crucially, adds a seventh – defamation. These seven elements accurately portray the experiences of women working across the public sphere interviewed for this research and can be further mapped onto the Twitter dataset.

Outlining the Empirical Data

The empirical evidence is drawn from 50 semi-structured interviews held with women employed in academia, journalism, policing and politics. These interviews were held both in person and via Zoom during the spring of 2020, with women based in the UK, the EU and the USA.

Twitter Data

Data were also gathered from tweets directed at women employed in the four occupational groups. This captured three 'Twitter storms' experienced by a Member of Parliament[1], an academic and a journalist, as they occurred in real time.

A Twitter storm is described as 'a sudden spike in activity surrounding a certain topic on the Twitter social media site' (Technopedia, 2013, p. 1). As Morello (2015) has highlighted, such storms often arise from nowhere and can have protracted consequences, being swiftly disseminated across the social media platform as a result of multiple tweets and retweets (Pfeffer et al., 2014; Vasterman, 2018). By focusing on these storms of communication, it was possible to illustrate the scale and ferocity of the tweets that are frequently sent to high-profile figures as a result of their engagement in public discourse. By performing a word frequency search across the dataset, it was possible to gain an insight into the tone of the tweets found in each of the storms. When viewed in isolation, these words and phrases often appear unremarkable. However, when read together, these tweets convey a wider derogatory culture that frequently denigrates women's appearance, experience, knowledge and opinions.

API research is 'a type of investigation based on the information collected by social media platforms and made available through standardized commands to query, filter, format and download such information' (Venturini & Rogers, 2019, p. 533). Following the takeover of Twitter by Elon Musk in October 2022 (Rohlinger et al., 2023), free access to the Twitter API for research purposes was

[1]At the time of data collection.

withdrawn, leaving this manner of data analysis now financially beyond many academic researchers.

Much of the social science research conducted using an API has been quantitative in nature, focused on analysing the volume of tweets on a given issue (e.g. Gorrell et al., 2020; Micalizzi, 2021). Whilst acknowledging the contribution made by this approach, this study provides a qualitative examination of the content of tweets sent during three separate storms of activity, recognising the benefit to be gained from an in-depth analysis of this data (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Software was employed to collect the tweets that named any of the women contained within a sample frame of 200 individuals who had (a) an active online presence and (b) who belonged to any of the four occupational groups being investigated. Data were collected between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2020. Compiling the data in this way made it possible to identify and analyse three 'Twitter storms'. The software used to interrogate the Twitter API simultaneously tagged the tweets sent to the sample frame that contained obscene or unpleasant terminology, as defined by Ofcom (2016). During the six months that API data were harvested, over 25 million tweets were collected, creating files amounting to some 2GB in size. The data were then output as text files and analysed using NVivo data analysis software.

Storm 1: Politician – 3 February 2020

The first storm scrutinised involved Tracy Brabin MP. On 3 February 2020, the then Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport raised a point of order about Brexit at the Despatch Box (Rawlinson, 2020). As she did so, the broken ankle that she had sustained the previous day caused her to stumble, and her dress to fall forwards, exposing her left shoulder (PA Media, 2020). The image was captured on camera and prompted the tweet, as shown in Fig. 2. This tweet was sent at 18:00 on the day of the incident.

Tweet text: "Is this really appropriate attire for parliament? @TracyBrabin #DressStandards.

Image included in tweet: *A screenshot of the BCC Parliament broadcast showing British politician Tracy Lynn Brabin speaking in the House of Commons, wearing a black top that shows her right shoulder.*

Fig. 2. Tweet Sent to Politician, 3 February 2020. Link to image: https://theweek.com/105540/tracy-brabin-what-are-the-conduct-rules-in-the-commons

This tweet generated a total of 55,368 tweets over the following three days. In contrast, the MP's Twitter feed normally received an average of 90 tweets per day. In response to the growing storm, at 15:55 on 4 February, Brabin tweeted the comment, as shown in Fig. 3.

Tweet text: "Tracy Brabin MP @TracyBrabin: Hello. Sorry I don't have time to reply to all of you commenting on this but I can confirm I'm not….
A slag
Hungover
A tart
About to breastfeed
A slapper
Drunk
Just been banged over a wheelie bin.

Who knew people could get so emotional over a shoulder… [eye rolling emoji]"

Fig. 3. Politician's Response on Twitter.

This gave rise to yet more tweets, many of which were retweets of Brabin's comment, in support of her stance. Many of the negative tweets coming after 15:55 on 4 February were sexualised, suggesting that Brabin's robust response unleashed a gratuitously sexual invective, as illustrated in Fig. 4.

Tweet text: "It's not the shoulder. It's the fact it hangs over showing off your breast area. It is not appropriate and unprofessional. Look like you've just had a quickie and rushed to get dressed

Fig. 4. Sexualised Tweet Sent to Politician.

Storm 2: Academic Commentator: 21 February 2022

The second storm occurred between 21 and 23 February 2020 and targeted the US academic and writer, Jude Ellison Sady Doyle[2]. Doyle is a prolific user of online platforms and has been the target of online abuse on several occasions (Doyle, 2011). They are also a prominent supporter of the Democratic Party and have in the past championed both Hillary Clinton (Crockett, 2016) and Elizabeth Warren (Doyle, 2020) in their respective Presidential bids. On 21 February 2020, they tweeted about their experience growing up with an aggressive father, and how this made them fearful of verbal hostility, as a reference to their dislike of the then candidate for the Democratic Party nomination, Bernie Sanders. The tweet is provided in Fig. 5.

[2]At the time of this analysis, Jude Ellison Sady Doyle was known as Sady Doyle.

> Original tweet text: "I'm sorry you don't like it when Bernie yells, but not all of us grew up in frigid WASP homes!!!"
>
> Reply tweet: "Sady Doyle @SadyDoyle: Once, my dad spent a few hours making a pot roast, and when he thought it was slightly overdone, he picked up each plate on the table and flung it at the wall. We didn't get to eat that night. Yeah, I guess you were lucky that your associations with men yelling are positive."

Fig. 5. Tweet Sent by Academic, 21 February 2020.

The tweet generated a total of 14,485 tweets over three days. Doyle usually received an average of 355 tweets per day.

Storm 3: Journalist: 25 April 2020

The third storm occurred between 25 and 27 April 2020 and targeted the journalist Naga Munchetty. On 25 April, she was presenting the television show 'BBC Breakfast', between 06:00 and 09:15. At 10:01, she was sent the tweet in Fig. 6.

> Tweet text: "I'm not known for my own sartorial elegance but why would anyone like Naga Munchetty feel the new to wear high-heeled shoes like these on a BBC TV breakfast news programme? Discuss…
>
> *Image in tweet: A screenshot of the BCC Breakfast Show, showing presenter Naga Munchetty on set wearing stiletto heels.*

Fig. 6. Tweet Sent to Journalist, 25 April 2020.

This tweet (Fig. 7) generated a total of 32,929 tweets over three days. In contrast, the journalist's Twitter feed normally receives an average of 150 tweets per day.

At 17:07 on the same day, Munchetty replied with the tweet, as shown in Fig. 7.

> Tweet text: "Naga Munchetty @BBCNaga: Because I want to."

Fig. 7. Journalist's Response on Twitter.

In a repetition of storm one, Munchetty's response gave rise to yet more tweets, and, in common with the support shown to the politician, it is likely that the retweets of Munchetty's response occurred in support of the journalist.

The pivoting of both these loci for abuse into (somewhat) supportive environments has strong parallels with the work of Micalizzi (2021), and the identification of Twitter as a possible site for the advancement of public discourse on the sociocultural construction of the role of women. Additionally, a considerable amount of abusive language was used to criticise the individual who sent the initial tweet. This highlights how abuse storms can become multi-directional.

Adding Defamation to the Typology of Online Abuse

The opening chapters of this book have illustrated how receiving online abuse has multiple impacts. Nevertheless, one consequence that has attracted limited consideration thus far is the effect that online abuse can have on an individual's professional standing within their chosen occupation and the wider community. Having a strong professional reputation is important for all those working at a senior level. However, there is evidence that this reputation building is particularly crucial for *women* as they seek to break through the 'glass ceiling' (Palmer & Simon, 2010, p. 22) that persists in many occupations (Aaltio et al., 2008). To achieve a position of power and then risk having that standing undermined by online abuse is both personally and professionally damaging. For the purposes of this discussion, the definition of defamation that has been applied is the one provided by Marwick and Miller (2014, p. 9), namely that 'defamation is the communication of a false statement of fact that harms the reputation of a victim, and includes libel, which covers written published statements, and slander, which covers spoken statements'. The three most common professionally damaging defamatory attacks recounted by interview participants were attacks on their integrity, their abilities and the accusation that an individual was a 'traitor'. The women targeted in the three Twitter storms were similarly subjected to abuse that denigrated their professional reputation. Angelotti (2013) highlights the challenges presented to existing laws on defamation by computer-mediated communication, emphasising how Twitter has 'increased the pressure of being first to publish, often to the detriment of truth and accuracy' (Angelotti, 2013, p. 432). In addition (in one of the few articles to reference defamation in the context of online abuse), Watts et al. (2017) suggest that the level of harm caused by 'cyber-bullying' may lead victims to seek civil redress although Marwick and Miller (2014) confirm that such cases are rare. However, in an indication of the lack of consensus on this issue, Lidsky (2000) warns against the use of defamation law in an attempt to stop the spread of online falsehoods, expressing concern that to do so risks endangering the public's right to free speech. This work has clear echoes of the wider debate on internet freedoms first discussed in Chapter Two.

Women interviewed for this study confirmed that the questioning of an individual's integrity occurs both as direct accusation and as an implied slur. The articulation of allegations was frequent and often felt relentless.

> *[I receive online abuse] basically challenging my ethics, or the way I operate, or that I have neglected my duty*. (Karen, Senior Police Officer)

An academic working in biological sciences spoke of the unexpected consequence of winning a large research grant:

> *I got some blow back [online] saying … what a horrible use of money … suggesting that I would use the money irresponsibly*. (Eileen, Academic at a European university)

Politicians often found their integrity being impugned in relation to financial impropriety, particularly if they had expressed an interest in supporting external organisations:

> *They said I was taking money from the [utilities] industry, which was nonsense. I was a water company shrill; I was this, I was that, and it just went on and on and on*. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Whilst occurring over a decade (and five parliaments) ago, the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009, when the Daily Telegraph newspaper discovered a web of illegal claims for public money made by MPs (Crewe & Walker, 2019), continues to negatively affect the way that politicians are perceived. This is often expressed in the online abuse they receive, with their financial integrity frequently questioned. One former MP illustrated this:

> *When they talk about, expenses, I never coined anything other than accommodation and my train fare, but when they talk about MPs expenses, if you count the fact that you've got to rent an office and buy equipment and all the rest of it, then if you count that as expenses, it can come to like a huge amount, but it's actually running two businesses if you've got two offices. But the abuse doesn't recognise that*. (Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

This echoes the work of Bishop (2014), who found that the then Conservative minister Esther McVey MP received a considerable amount of online abuse relating to expense claims:

> *In the case of the person who posted about Esther McVey, they used it as an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction of her as a Conservative Party politician, such as references to her completing 'expenses' forms and pejoratively calling her a 'Tory'. In fact such allegations were unfounded as McVey entered Parliament after reforms had been made to deal with the 'expenses scandal'* (Bishop, 2014, p. 120).

The Twitter storm involving politician Tracy Brabin included 33 separate references to financial integrity over the purchase of the dress she was pictured wearing. A summary of these is provided in Fig. 8.

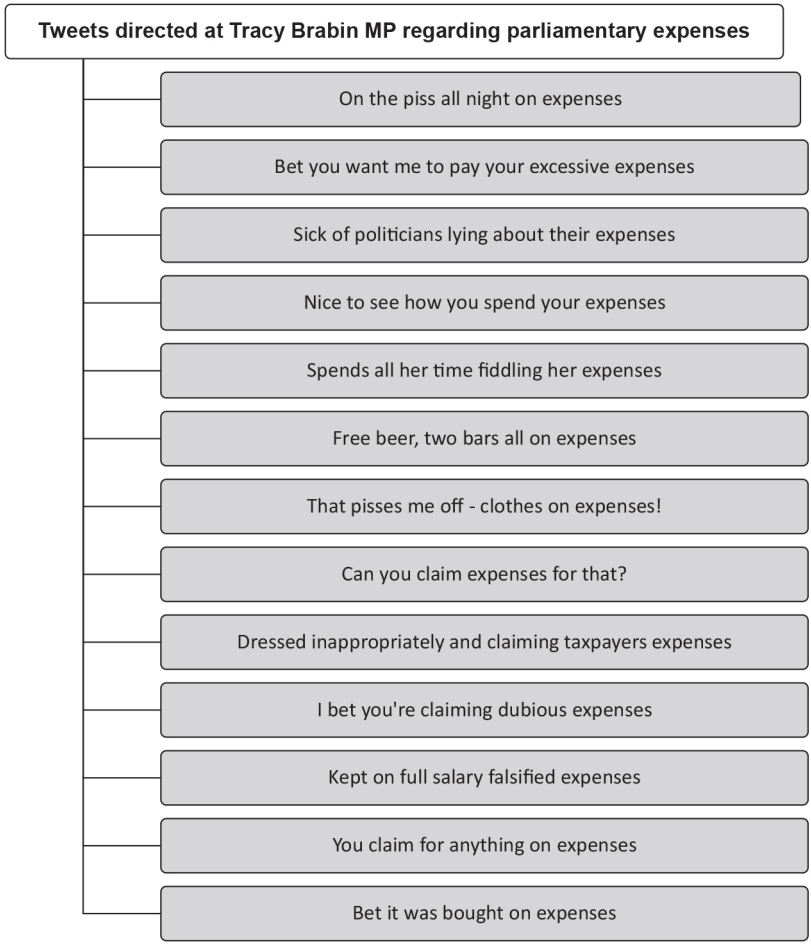

Fig. 8. Anonymised Summary of Tweets Referencing the Expense Claims of Tracy Brabin MP.

The analysis of the Brabin storm identified a wider range of potentially defamatory tweets, many of which focused on Brabin's previous occupation as an actor. Almost nine thousand of these tweets also referred to prostitution. This illustrates the enduring notion of acting as a profession akin to sex work, which dates back to the 17th century (Rosenthal, 2007). An example of four of these tweets is provided in Table 2.

As well as questions about their integrity, women also found their professional abilities under constant scrutiny:

Table 2. Tweets Referencing Prostitution.

Tweet Time Stamp	Tweet Contents
04/02/20 10:07:05	She looks like a 50p whore
04/02/20 10:54:02	Put some clothes on love, you look like a tart!
04/02/20 12:06:52	You look like you've been in a broom cupboard with Bercow's wife! Is it really appropriate to go to Parliament dressed as a veteran hooker?
04/02/20 12:11:08	Actresses and prostitutes were once much the same thing. Some would say they often still are. Still, the old tricks come in handy when she has to go and pick up the postal votes. She's 50 years too old for that crowd but they're not fussy

> *A number of accounts, all of them anonymous, literally every time I say anything, say I'm stupid, I'm naïve, that the comments I make on behalf of the organisation are inaccurate. So there's that very targeted abuse: every time you say anything, we're going to say you're wrong*. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

Sarah's contribution confirms the enduring nature of sexism within policing (Brown, 1998). Long before the advent of online abuse, Berg and Budnick (1986) highlighted how the traits of competence and technical proficiency are more commonly attributed to male officers. Similar experiences were shared by women in other professions:

> *A stream of stuff that comes through … undermining me in my role, telling me I'm stupid or don't deserve to be in the role I'm in, that kind of stuff*. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

Several participants recognised that the treatment that they had received had parallels with gender-based violence experienced in the offline space:

> *People on message boards started suggesting that I made up … the incident for attention. That there was this huge attention seeking merit around it, which is of course the same kind of narrative used when women voice sexual assault offline*. (Christie, Academic at a UK university)

> *Spreading lies and misinformation is a form of abuse as well, because that is bringing to that person's door even more anger*. (Constanta, Political Staffer)

A specific epithet that arose repeatedly was the use of the word 'traitor', which was frequently directed at politicians during the various Brexit debates in Parliament. Many politicians felt that this exacerbated the febrile atmosphere

that they were navigating prior to Britain's exit from the European Union in 2020. This word, which does not appear on the Ofcom list of offensive terms (2016), nevertheless had a deleterious impact on those to whom it was targeted, as three women explained:

> *The tone and the nature of the aggression [of the online abuse], the far right, the use of terms like traitor and betrayal.* (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Patricia, who was a Member of Parliament until the General Election of 2019, made a direct link between the abuse that she received online and the abuse she faced in the street:

> *There's a lot of online abuse, like in that period outside of Parliament when we had all those demonstrators and it got very difficult at one point to walk down the street without people shouting after me, and being told I was a traitor*. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Whilst Patricia's evidence is compelling, such an assertion should be treated with a certain amount of caution, as there is no direct evidence linking the two. Similar evidence was provided by a political staffer:

> *She got an email Christmas card and when I opened it up it said you're a traitor to your race, the white race is rising, Brexit has arrived.* (Constanta, Political Staffer)

Obviously, the term 'traitor' is not in and of itself, an abusive one. However, when weaponised in a politically febrile environment, and combined with racist jibes, as is evidenced here, many of the participants felt that it contained a potentially dangerous message. This was presciently explained by the daughter of a serving politician, writing at the height of the Brexit debate in Parliament:

> *I am scared. I am scared when I scroll through the replies to her tweets calling her a liar and a traitor. I am scared when our house gets fitted with panic buttons, industrial-locking doors and explosive bags to catch the mail … Even if we disagree with our politicians, when was this something we actively wanted to hurt them for?*
>
> *This whole thing has gone too far. When people start getting hurt, that is the moment we should step back and ask if any of this is even worth it. All the anger and the screaming and the taking sides. The traitors and the liars and the surrendering* (Cooper, 2019, p. 1).

What Cooper (2019) describes is the concern that many women in public facing occupations feel, namely that the changes to the nature of public debate, the

switch from robust discussion to violent invective, contains within it a threat to the safety of women that mirrors the threat posed by gender-based violence in the private sphere.

Whilst there is clear evidence that defamation is a recurring element of the online abuse directed at women in public facing occupations, there have been very few cases of defamation brought before the courts (Marwick & Miller, 2014).

Emotional Harm as an Element of Online Abuse

Emotional harm is another element of online abuse and is by far the biggest consequence of such communication. The variety of issues raised under this topic have been grouped into three themes: the effect on an individual's wellbeing, the wider impact of emotional harm on the person targeted and the repercussions of the emotional harm as it relates to others, such as family members, friends and staff.

> *I don't know anyone who's trying to do socio-political activism who's not utterly ground down to a paste from having to deal either from active abuse or the fear of abuse and having to tie themselves into knots and take elaborate measures to avoid it*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *I knew that all that abuse would continue [after the election] and I was expecting my majority to go down to a couple of thousand, and I thought they'll keep coming, they'll smell blood and all I used to do was get bullied, permanently. It was absolutely horrendous*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

These interviews reveal the scale of harm caused by online abuse, echoing earlier literature (e.g. Hodson et al., 2018; Jane, 2017a; Mantilla, 2015). Once again, there were considerable similarities shared by the four occupational groups. Reiterating the quote from Phyllis, many women described online abuse as a form of bullying:

> *It really is bullying. A lot of my abuse is from people that are not my constituents. I actually can't think of another way of describing it. They're bullies. And I think the traits of a bully are very cowardly*. (Jill, Member of Parliament)

Other women spoke of their bemusement regarding online abuse and questioned the motivations of those sending it:

> *Why do people have this desire to do this to strangers, to insult, harass and bully strangers? Is that just innate in humanity and has the internet just created a process to finally let it out, or is it something about the internet that encourages it? Why do they do that? What are they getting out of doing that? It's just bizarre*. (Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university)

Wendy felt that often, the sending of abuse was an end in itself:

> *People don't want me to reply, they don't expect a reply, it's just abuse. And I think that's changed. Before, even if it was like something at a level I would consider abuse, it would be in anticipation of a response. Whereas now, I don't think these people even want a response, they just want to fling mud*. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

Another participant wondered if there had been a change in the social or political climate that had led to a greater tolerance of abuse:

> *I think it has become more permissible to talk about stuff that has previously been less acceptable, and it's more socially acceptable to say something really nasty. Now I think people feel that open permission to say more stuff*. (Karen, Senior Police Officer)

Sometimes, the motivation for online abuse was political.

> *There was an attempt … in 2013, when a Liberal Democrat councillor who'd gone to UKIP, started trying to bully me and undermine me online, because of council cuts, as though that was my fault*. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Politically motivated abuse is a particular problem for women politicians, and crucially, the abuse is not restricted to one specific political party or ideology.

Another characteristic of online abuse discussed was the sheer nastiness of many of the comments:

> *There were some who almost pretty much any time I put a tweet out, would give me some sort of sneering comment and wind people up*.
>
> *The abuse was more misogynistic, it would be absolutely vitriolic … it was so horrific*. (Stacey, Senior Police Officer)

Sometimes, abuse sent via online platforms was consolidated with abusive emails:

> *I definitely got emails that said things like you're a stupid bitch, you should kill yourself*. (Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university)

The abusive tone of much online abuse was similarly raised by others:

> *When I started looking at the online abuse, I was really shocked and dismayed at the amount of swearing, huge amounts of negativity, political criticism, insults, rudeness, just nastiness, that were on my profile*. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *I don't expect to receive absolute, misogynistic, homophobic, absolute hate of my sheer existence*. (Karen, Senior Police Officer)

> *There's one guy in particular who essentially told me to burn in hell, where at least I'll see my dead dad again. So that was nice*. (Simone, Member of Parliament)

A significant factor in the emotional harm engendered by online abuse is the fear that it generates. This seemed to be a particular issue for politicians who had lost their seats in the General Election of 2019. This is unlikely to be coincidental, as these constituencies were often the areas where debate was most polarised, and consequently, where levels of online abuse were highest. The women in these seats often had little protection afforded to them in terms of a litany of staff and extra security, leaving them feeling more vulnerable than those holding Front Bench positions.

> *I got to the point where I was genuinely fearful about going on the train, fearful of walking my dog, fearful of going to events … social media had made me feel unwanted in my home, it made me feel that I couldn't go to the pub because I didn't know who was sitting at the table next to me. I didn't want to go anywhere on my own*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *So, there was about three months where I didn't go to the constituency on my own at all. I just didn't go there because I was too nervous about staying overnight in the house. And it was at that point that we had all the panic alarms installed, which was being done as part of a parliament security upgrade, but that was my absolute priority, to get the panic alarms in that house*. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *I would have a wobble about my security, probably once a year, when I'd see something online that really scared me … there'd be that one day a year I'd just need to hide from the world because I was scared about someone hurting me*. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Issues around safety were not confined only to women involved in national politics and affected politicians serving at a local level. Kerry spoke of her fears as a Muslim woman representing a local council ward in an inner city:

> *I have seen people online, saying things like 'what's [NAME OF CITY] doing, electing you know, people', and using the 'n' word. But if that became physical then I would be really worried. I do actually worry that if someone attacks me and says, you know, that woman,*

> *or 'n' woman that lives there is a councillor. And if the EDL*[3] *comes to me where I live, then if they do find out that it's a politician that's Black, why have they elected her, then they could attack somebody in the street, that looks just like me*. (Kerry, Local Councillor)

It is worth noting, however, that fears around personal safety were not solely limited to politicians. Police officers, academics and journalists had all received threatening online abuse as a result of their role:

> *My role as Hate Crime Coordinator and the abuse [I received] … I was fearful of further abuse*. (Anna, Police Officer)

Christie spoke about the abuse she received as a consequence of researching the growth of the involuntary celibacy (Incel) (Ging, 2019) movement in the UK:

> *That was the first time I was properly made to feel scared and that there was a real concern for my physical safety*. (Christie, Academic at a UK university)

Similar fears were expressed in regard to activity in the USA:

> *And then really with the rise of Trump … the anti-Semitism online has been … fucking terrifying but it's also been fucking terrifying offline*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

The emotional fallout of receiving online abuse was highlighted by Beth:

> *Certainly in the last year it became quite physically threatening, and the spill over between the Twitter threats and abuse and what was going on outside our workplace … those lines became blurred, and we felt under psychological and physical siege*. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

A consequence of the fear discussed here is that women begin to make choices about the sort of work they will be involved in, limiting both their own career choices (and potential advancement) and the coverage of socially important issues, as Ann, an academic and journalist based in the USA, explained:

> *Right now, in the United States … women journalists who I've spoken to really would love the opportunity to write about white supremacist extremism. But they don't, because of their profound worries about their own personal safety*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

[3] *English Defence League, a Far-Right political organisation.*

Being exposed to violent invective has an impact on many aspects of an individual's life. These long-term psychological consequences were discussed by two women who had been involved in particularly high-profile political campaigns:

> *I think that one of the reasons I burnt out was my experience that being in politics, in particular in politics in an age of social media, is that you are required to have a persona … and that online persona always has to be ready for the battle and the fight that is involved online. I felt like the person that I was having to be was further and further away from who I really was, and that the person the people saw was not the person that I really was. But I didn't have any choice in it*. (Klaudia, Politician in Scotland)

> *Every time I did go into Twitter, which I had to do for work, I would be faced with this absolute wall of abuse. All designed to make you feel crap about yourself and your abilities. You have to build far greater resilience to deal with that, and I talked quite openly about this at the time, that my fear was, as much as I was able to give myself the emotional armour to protect myself, what was the price of that? Was it empathy, were you less willing to feel other people's experiences because you'd built up so many barriers to protect yourself from it?* (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

The theory of emotional labour, where the 'trained management of feeling' (Hochschild, 2012, p. 24) becomes an intrinsic part of an individual's employment, is evident in the experiences detailed here. Indeed, this evidence suggests that the effort expended on managing the emotional response to online abuse is even greater than the emotional labour demanded in the workplace described by Hochschild (2012); with it subsuming many parts of an individual's existence.

Sophie highlighted the degree of emotional labour that women in public facing occupations undertake, both individually and collectively, to manage the onslaught of online abuse that is received. An important part of Sophie's contribution is the assertion that, just like in the forms of emotional labour Hochschild (2012) discussed in her original study, there is very little recognition of this work.

> *Somebody needs to be doing this work and the [tech] companies aren't doing it, and so we're all just picking it up and no one even notices it's getting done … it's just another form of unpaid women's labour*.

Sophie then discussed the inequity of this situation:

> *We need to acknowledge that it is unfair that we have to think about this … we never talk about the emotional experience of this, we are individually left to be alone with our experiences*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

One malign aspect of the barrage of online abuse is the relentlessness of the situation, which adds to the emotional harm that it causes, as it feels inescapable.

> *It's constant and exhausting and that's even when you're not engaging*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *It affects my partner, who wanted to take on everybody who was threatening me. We couldn't get away from it … No. We just can't get away from it*. (Karen, Senior Police Officer)

> *Oh my God, it's twenty-four-seven … I think it's too much. It's really too much*. (Jill, Member of Parliament)

In addition to the emotional effort of managing online abuse, it is also hugely time consuming:

> *Often I just don't gravitate toward it because I'm like 'do I have the energy to deal with the bullshit today?' … it's exhausting*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *It was relentless. I think there was something like seven or eight thousand responses, most of which were negative*. (Samantha, Senior Police Officer)

> *It absorbed so much time and energy, it was so difficult to do anything else*. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

As Patricia expressed, many women in public facing occupations feel that the need to monitor their online activity is hugely time consuming and creates a substantial burden, particularly for those with no support staff (Ward & McLoughlin, 2020). In addition, the fatigue caused by the constant surveillance of social media sites was linked to staff sickness and feelings of 'burn out'. The impact of online abuse is not just felt by the individual being targeted. The consequences of this frequently violent invective can spread to family members, staff and even the wider community. The fear is often felt most around the threat that is posed to women's friends and family members, as Peggy explained:

> *I took my son to an event in the constituency and … I noticed he was standing with his back to the wall by the door and I said, come over here. And my son said, 'I'm just going to stand here', and I said why, and he said, 'because if I've got my back to the wall people can't harm me from behind, and if I'm by the door I can escape'. And I just wanted to burst into tears that he feels that way*. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

> *The fear [I had] for my mother was just awful, truly, truly awful. My stepfather dealt with it by learning self-defence. Because he was scared, they were scared*. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *Somebody messaged me and said, it serves you right if your daughter gets raped in front of you. They made that physical threat to me and to my family*. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)

Some felt that the threat posed to their family was so great that they put in place safeguards to protect them:

> *I spoke to my daughter if I ever had to leave her alone because I was popping out for something, I would say stay in my room, lock the front door, lock the bedroom door and if anyone bursts in, lock the bathroom door and jump out the window. You know, I drilled her into how to escape*. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *One guy said, 'protect your child, it would be a shame if something happened to him in a few years when he's going to school or something', which was obviously horrible. The fact that he threatened my child … resulted in us having to go and have a conversation with my son's head teacher and my other son's nursery manager, that's not a conversation we wanted to have. So, even if the guy didn't intend to do anything … he had an impact on us in the physical world*. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Threats to family members, whilst more common amongst politicians, were not restricted solely to this group, with academics, police officers and journalists recounting similar episodes:

> *They've made so many comments about my ethnicity, they've written about my family, my husband, my son … what really bothered me was to see family and friends mentioned on these white supremacist sites, because obviously they didn't ask for any of that …* (Linda, UK-based journalist)

> *He sent WhatsApp messages … And the day after he started writing stuff about my mother, that my mother was a horrible person, stupid like me, he threatened my father a lot. I can never listen to those audio messages from that night. But my lawyer said a lot of actual death threats were to me and my father in those audio messages. That was the final incident. That's when the police intervened, and they sent him a formal restriction order*. (Ranjit, Academic at a European university)

> *It does have an impact, a really big impact, on my family, particularly on my daughter. She literally searches my Twitter account every day. She doesn't just look me up, she looks up what people are saying about me and … she really worries. The long-term effects on people like her are really profound.* (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

Several women felt a sense of responsibility for their loved ones being exposed to online abuse:

> *I chose to enter public life. I chose to stand for Parliament. They didn't. None of them have chosen to do that. My kids, my grandkids, my staff aren't public figures*. (Loretta, Member of Parliament)

In July 2017, in a speech which brought the online abuse received by politicians to the forefront of public attention, the Labour MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, Diane Abbott, read out a sample of the abuse received by her office, during a debate on abuse and intimidation in UK elections (Hansard, 2017). One of the most striking observations that she made was when talking of the impact of online abuse on her staff:

> One of my members of staff said that the most surprising thing about coming to work for me is how often she has to read the word 'nigger'. It comes in through emails, Twitter and Facebook …. I accept that male politicians get abuse, too, but I hope the one thing we can agree on in this Chamber is that it is much worse for women. As well as the rise of online media, it is helped by anonymity. People would not come up to me and attack me for being a nigger in public, but they do it online. It is not once a week or during an election; it is every day. My staff switch on the computer and go on to Facebook and Twitter, and they see this stuff. (Hansard, 2017, Column 159WH)

The experiences Abbott recounted in this debate were familiar to contributors in this research, who felt a sense of both concern and responsibility for their staff:

> *I get really protective. I go really mamma bear about our team. I'm probably more protective of them*. (Souad, Academic at a UK university)

> *I worry about the wellbeing of my staff and actually that's the thing that will break me. The fact that I wasn't there when this bloke broke into the office. It's the only time that I've sat in my office in Westminster and wept because it's me, they're conscripts to this life*. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

Once again, the most vitriolic and potentially dangerous attacks were directed at the staff of politicians based in the more marginal constituencies, where debate was the most heated.

> *I've always felt really worried … because of social media, more fearful for their sake. But also the impact on them for having to trawl through it, having to see it all the time, I didn't see half of what they did*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *We put in place a system where my staff would read my notifications, and it got to the stage where they stopped that because of what it was doing to their mental health. We probably should have stopped it earlier than we did. But because I wasn't seeing it, I wasn't aware. I think that for people that have never seen it, it's a shock … and to wade through it was taking hours*. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Charmaine, Caroline and Beth each expressed concern about the impact of online abuse on new or younger staff members, providing the following illustrations:

> *For most of my staff, this was their first job in politics. So, they aren't necessarily used to that and so it's hard for them. I think that some of the people who probably end up bearing the brunt of the impact of online abuse, are the staff of those in leadership or who are in senior roles like being an MP*. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *So, my staff who were amazing, incredible, and protective, they saw all of that [the online abuse]. We never published my office address, after we saw what happened with Jo Cox*[4]*. My staff were always with me, and therefore, they were potentially vulnerable. Their emotional wellbeing [was being jeopardised]. In order to protect me, they were seeing things that were just awful*. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *I was most concerned about my staff in the constituency office because they're the most vulnerable, and that's where the attacks tended to take place*. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

[4]*The assassination of Jo Cox, the Labour MP for Batley & Spen, in June 2016.*

The feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted were shared by political staffers, who often found themselves in the front line when dealing with online abuse:

> *It was just, it was relentless, it really was relentless.* (Constanta, Political Staffer)

> *Once she was elected, it was absolutely impossible, because … at that point there were hundreds of comments every couple of seconds.* (Svetlana, Political Staffer)

Svetlana also revealed the impact that the role working for a high-profile politician had:

> *I think it's the fact that it was every single day, it was draining … and I know, for my colleagues, it really did affect their mental health.* (Svetlana, Political Staffer)

Concern about the impact that receiving online abuse had on others was not limited to family members and staff. An academic working in the field of sexual violence felt a sense of responsibility towards her research participants when the website set up for their use was infiltrated by men's rights activists:

> *A bunch of comments came through from men … who were saying things like 'this research is a waste of time', to things like 'this bitch has no idea' … 'what a cunt'. They even created a YouTube video that seeks to make fun of the research, it was just so odd.*
>
> *And then under the YouTube video there were then all of these comments … making fun of the research, making fun of the institutions, and then just going off on a bit of a rant about how feminists have lost the plot and are dirty and we bleed everywhere.*
>
> *But then I [had] … to disable the comments, because what started to happen was that women who had previously left comments saying that they wanted to participate or they were interested in the project … men started posting underneath their comments, and so those women were being notified. The abuse wasn't only directed at me, it started to become directed at the other women who had chosen to participate.* (Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university)

An MP in Scotland spoke about the responsibility she felt towards a company in her constituency that became the target for online abuse as a consequence of appearing in a social media post with her:

> *I did feel terrible because I thought, here's a local business, who's facilitated a visit, and that's what they've got for it*. (Esther, Member of Parliament)

Another MP reported a similar online attack directed at a volunteer at a local food bank:

> *There's this lovely guy who runs the food bank, and he's like eighty-six or something, and he's not a [name of party], but he does go in to back me. They'll say, she's done fuck all, blah, blah, blah, and he'll say oh, no, no, no, she's done X, Y and Z. And then someone will say, what do you know, I've looked at your profile, I could do what you've done in fifty years in a year. You know, just really nasty. So, this poor old man, and he's lovely. So, I phoned him just to check he was ok*. (Jill, Member of Parliament)

Sometimes, simply being tagged by a politician caused a member of the public to become the target of online abuse:

> *So, there's a woman that I met at a mental health event … and she'd written this brilliant thing about how to cope with anxiety and so I retweeted it and said this is brilliant, and she got back to me and said, I'm so flattered that you have retweeted it and what you've said, but could you remove it please because I'm just getting all this abuse … online abuse doesn't just affect me, it's very much like classic violence against women and girls, the first thing that they have to try and do is to isolate you, to stop other people talking to you, to stop people interacting. And that's literally rule one of a domestic abuser. It's very, very similar*. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

As Peggy emphasises, the repercussions faced by women interacting with politicians on Twitter, evidenced here by an individual requesting to be removed from prominence, provides another parallel with the silencing and ostracisation that is a recognised feature of gender-based violence (Camp, 2018). This type of harm is pernicious and enduring and illustrates how detriment can be caused to others.

Peggy expressed concern for the wellbeing of members of the public who engaged with the online abuse that was directed at her. Recounting the experience of meeting a constituent who was under the mistaken belief that she had called a section of voters 'stupid', an accusation that she had proved to him was incorrect:

> *He said, well that's not what I was told. I was told this, this, and this … and I read this on the internet, I read that. He was harmed by that, because he is not a well person. So, it's not just harming me, it is harming vulnerable people who, the people who are doing it claim to represent. Whereas all I want to do is help people. On a number of*

> *occasions I have dropped all charges against people who have literally threatened the life of me and my family, because I can see that they are not the root of the harm. They are a product of it, just as I am, and they are a victim of it just as I am a victim of it*. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

When viewed as a whole, the testimony provided here reveals the scale of harm being experienced by women across public facing occupations. The following quote from Kerry encapsulates the feelings of many of the women spoken to about the emotional harm inflicted by online abuse:

> *It doesn't really matter who you are, as long as you're a woman and a politician, people tend to forget that you're a mum, you're a wife, you're a sister, you're a cousin, you're a friend*. (Kerry, Local Councillor)

Harassment

Whilst equally responsible for causing the sort of emotional harm to the individual and wider community that is discussed above, harassment is nevertheless subtly different. The accounts of online harassment provided here reveal a systematic campaign of intimidation targeted at an individual, which is frequently perpetrated by one person or group. In this way, it has clear parallels with theories of gender-based violence outlined in Chapter Three. The harassment dimension of online abuse outlined here uses the framing provided by Walklate (1995), which defines sexual harassment as a public manifestation of gender-based violence. Whilst not always overtly sexual, the harassment described here certainly fits within Walklate's (1995) typology, as a form of violence that is precipitated by gender and occurs within public gaze.

One way in which online abuse becomes harassment is when multiple attacks on an individual take place, orchestrated by either someone acting alone, or by a group. Such attacks are increasingly common and had been experienced by women across the four professions analysed. Tiprat, an Academic in the USA, described what this means in reality:

> *Hordes of men, sometimes thousands, coordinate with each other on various online forums, come together to attack a woman*. (Tiprat, Academic based in the USA)

Tiprat's description certainly applies to the situation described by Linda, a journalist in the UK, who finds herself the focus of orchestrated campaigns of harassment whenever she has a book published.

> *When my first book came out, in 2017, which is on gender, I did get some sexists and misogynists who targeted me. But it was when my latest book came out last summer that I got a huge amount of racist*

> *abuse. A community of people online started to mobilise. One of them made a YouTube video of me, where he pretended to be Indian and tried to imitate me. That got taken down because there were a lot of complaints. But he put it back on to BitTube, another platform, not YouTube*. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

Linda was not the only participant to have been the focus of such malign activity. Sarah recounted her experiences of harassment, both experienced by her personally, and those that she had been made aware of in an operational capacity:

> *At a countrywide level, whereas before there was social media … you could have an instance where somebody would abuse somebody in the street it would be a one on one, or a one on five, or a one on ten intervention, when it happens online, so many more people can see it and therefore it becomes a much bigger thing more quickly. So, I think it has a bigger impact on victims because they think they've been more widely humiliated*. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

> *The people who do it know that they are chasing you to your very marrow. Everything you do, they are chasing you all the time and never leaving you alone. And the 'pile-ons' are designed to make an individual feel persecuted and overwhelmed. Then when they think they've done their job, they back away*. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The phenomenon of multiple people orchestrating an attack was similarly experienced by Linda, this time via a website for supporters of white supremacy:

> *The community of people who organise around this kind of intellectual racism, they are quite small and they're very global, so they all know each other. In my last book, I did write about the rise of the far right and some of these individual figures, so they targeted me as a result of that … then there was a lot of stuff on white supremacist websites, mainly in the US, and that doesn't really stop, that seems to be ongoing*. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

The perpetrators of orchestrated campaigns of harassment were not only drawn from Far-Right organisations. They also emanated from small, local groups, particularly in marginal parliamentary constituencies, where election campaigning was especially intense.

> *What was really damaging, and I regret never really getting a handle on … I don't know if I could, was community groups. So, there would be like [village name] Uncensored, a community, gossip Facebook site, and a similar group that covered [local town] and the admin*

> *on those would be horrendous and if any of our members went on to defend me or push back, they got blocked, their comments were deleted, and they were blocked. So, all this stuff was going to thousands of people. I've never met these people. All I've done is try and help people with their casework, try and be a good local MP*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *Sometimes things got to such a level of vitriol, so then you think there's probably some forum somewhere where somebody's posted the link and they almost agree to gang up, that is what the behaviour is like. And I don't know what was on those horrible forums, but I can't help but feel that people are being radicalised and egged on by others in a way that is much more than a random group of friends that meet down the pub. People gravitate towards others that are like them, so the people who are most extreme find others who are extreme*. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *There would be insults, so, if I did a media appearance, there would be orchestrated troll armies, so people would put the message out on their Facebook and then everyone would come off Facebook and pile on to Twitter to attack me. Some of which were accounts that only had two followers and had literally been set up in order to harass me*. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Whether orchestrated by groups within a well-financed and well-organised network, or more organically created, where individuals sharing similar viewpoints 'pile on' to add to the abuse being directed at an individual, the one thing that these activities share is the ability to mobilise at speed, use multiple platforms and exert a significant amount of pressure and distress upon an individual (Thompson & Cover, 2021):

> *A video on Facebook doesn't stay on Facebook. It goes to Instagram, and it goes to WhatsApp, and then it went to Twitter*. (Souad, Academic at a UK university)

> *There's also a kind of abuse that I think is the hardest to get people to pay attention to, which is a relentless deluge of negative content from lots of accounts. Each person can look at their individual tweet and claim 'I am just criticising you', but when you experience it from hundreds and hundreds of people, and it's organised online … it's harassment*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *There's certainly good evidence that online people … at the really nasty end, find other people, someone who before the internet may have just sat in their bedroom and thought dark thoughts, now they find other people around the world thinking in similar ways and are*

> *affirmed and strengthened by that … it probably does create more of a physical risk*. (Maria, Member of the House of Lords)

> *It [the abuse] was clearly organised, that was the thing that made it worse, the organised nature of it. That was what changed*. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Peggy described the scale of a typical campaign of harassment:

> *It's not just abuse, it's harassment because it's thousands of messages*.

> *[…] I have a man who has sent me thousands and thousands of emails. Originally, when I reported that to the police they went and told him not to do it … and it made it worse. And it is deeply misogynistic, deeply racist stuff that this man sends me It is just horrendous. Absolutely horrendous. And, when I say thousands, I mean it … on one occasion he sent me a hundred and twenty emails in twenty minutes*. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

Wendy and Simone each provided examples of orchestrated campaigns of online harassment, illustrating how politicians at both a local and national level are targeted for abuse:

> *He routinely posts screenshots of my profile and tells people to go and give me abuse. And he's got hundreds of thousands of followers. What he did, the thing that I reported … he had screenshotted my profile on the tweet I put out, he blocked me so I can't see it, I just notice a spike in abuse … and then I'll ask someone to go check his profile and yeah, he'd screenshotted me*. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

> *It doesn't necessarily bother me if someone swears at me. That I can take. But it's when it's a sustained and repeated tirade, that I think it becomes abuse. There has been … there's one guy in particular who responded to every single tweet I put out, with something incredibly derogatory*. (Simone, Member of Parliament)

Rose described how some pile-ons can emerge from nowhere, seemingly sparked by a throwaway comment.

> *I got a massive pile on, to the point where I did something I've never done before: I protected my [Twitter] account for a few days. There wasn't a sustained trolling or a sustained campaign. It wasn't coordinated. It was just a massive pile on of people, a lot of them repeating things that had already been said. If you dare say, [something is] not as clear cut as that, then they'll pile on and start. And otherwise rational people tell you you're just like cruel and heartless and what harm can it do*. (Rose, Academic based in the USA)

Contributors felt that such attacks were harmful, and had a detrimental impact upon the individual, because they demanded time and energy, and were ultimately a distraction from existing workloads:

> *We need an understanding of what this is, this is why this is not benign, this is why this seemingly non-abusive pile on is in fact abuse*. (Rose, Academic based in the USA)

> *On certain topics, people pile on, and I've had that happen to me a couple of times, groups of racists from across the world. It can happen at any time. You look at something you posted ages ago and suddenly one very influential person on Twitter picks it up and suddenly all their followers are piling on and there's nothing you can do about it*. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

The experiences of women of colour are frequently the most extreme (Tariq & Syed, 2018). This was certainly the experience of Kerry, who felt that her intersecting identities made her a target for harassment.

> *Because I'm a woman, because I'm Black, because I wear a hijab, if you escalate it then they would just come out from all over the place and I fear these great boxes I'm ticking. One of them is going to be the target, and then obviously the other two would come on board as well*. (Kerry, Local Councillor)

It is important to acknowledge the difference between the sending of individual malicious tweets and an orchestrated campaign that may involve many people from across the world. This is a differentiation that is not always made, and consequently, the seriousness of attacks of online abuse can be overlooked, or incorrectly described as a 'spat', rather than an organised hate campaign (Salter, 2018).

'Doxxing' is the term that describes a form of 'online abuse where a malicious party harms another by releasing identifying or sensitive information' (Snyder et al., 2017, p. 432). Whilst originally a hallmark of the Gamergate scandal in the USA, which saw the personal details of many women working in and writing about the computer gaming industry released with malicious intent (Salter, 2018), doxxing has become an all-too-common feature of online abuse.

The following contributions relate directly to the experience of being 'doxxed', illustrating that geographical boundaries prove no barrier to those intent on perpetrating online abuse:

> *A couple of years ago … I was doxxed … by an account in the States, and they thought they'd put my home address, but it was actually our old address … they published it on a website in the States*. (Michelle, Journalist based in the UK)

> *Women are doxxed collectively. People [are] sharing our private information for the purpose of malice and using that in a threatening way*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

The literature confirms that the aim of orchestrated attacks, 'pile ons' and doxxing, is to silence women, whether by prompting them not to comment on controversial topics, removing their social media accounts or shutting down their blogs (e.g. Citron, 2014; Searles et al., 2020). Removing the opportunity for women to engage in free speech, risks ensuring that the only voices that are heard are those that are white, male and privileged (Phillips, 2012).

Just as women have long had to employ various measures to protect themselves against they have faced in the physical world (Wise & Stanley, 1987), similar measures are frequently necessary online. Sophie described the measures that she had to take to protect herself against doxxing attacks:

> *We actually delayed the launch of the project so that we could take some time to lockdown our information online. It took an entire weekend to scrub my address from the internet. One of the things people don't understand is the amount of labour that is required … Like the tax. Like if you want to speak online and not be threatened, the amount of labour that it requires. And money: I pay an annual service to keep scrubbing my address from the internet*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

Linda, who discovered that her personal information had been distributed across several white supremacist websites, attempted to safeguard her privacy in order to reduce the risk to her safety. However, she found this an impossible task:

> *It's quite difficult. There's not really anything I can do about it. When the white supremacist website listed my family background and my parents' names and my old address and my husband's name and my son's name on their website, I did ask Google to get that page taken down, but they wouldn't take it down, so there's not really anything I can do*. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

The work that Sophie and Linda describe having to undertake to protect themselves has clear parallels with the safety work that women are obliged to take against public sexual harassment (Vera-Gray, 2018).

This appears to be a particular problem for academics. This group of women may have been more aware of their need for safety work because they are less likely to have the protective barrier provided by a staff team. This often left them feeling at risk. Numerous examples of safety work undertaken to alleviate both the likelihood and impact of online abuse were offered by the contributors to this study. These examples broadly fit into two categories: the safety work undertaken to protect oneself and one's work and the safety work undertaken to protect children and other family members:

> *I hid my pregnancy. I was on the news at eight and a half months pregnant and I hid my belly under a table. I entirely hid my pregnancy on social media*. (Christie, Academic at a UK university)

> *I try very hard when I do any media. Like I don't do it at my house. You won't believe how many journalists have said, can we interview at your house, can we film you at home? I'm like, no!* (Souad, Academic at a UK university)

> *There's filters on my website … on my emails … even my Twitter account has muted certain words, so I won't see it. Most of us have taken our own protection levels seriously*. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

Emma felt that the safety work she employed was an inevitable consequence of speaking out. This has parallels with the notion of a 'tax' being paid by women to use their voices, described earlier in this chapter.

> *If it means I can continue my online presence, continue to live my online life without seeing stuff on a regular basis, that's something I can live with. Is it enough? Of course not*. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

> *I don't have my personal account linked into my work accounts. So I've got a Twitter account, I've got an Instagram account which is with friends, but I don't share those two things. Because of what I work on, I try and keep my personal life off the internet*. (Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university)

Jacqueline went on to explain how the safeguards women employ in their online activity mirrors the actions taken in the offline environment, a point echoed by Ann, which emphasises the global nature of this kind of protective toil:

> *Women must behave online in the same way that they adapt to threats offline, to the degree that we don't even think about it. Most women don't think about it, it's just part of their daily routines. They don't do certain things, and I hate that, I understand the costs of that level of vigilance, whether it's conscious or not*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *The sort of thing women are doing online when they're having to use these platforms to communicate messages around feminism or violence or anything that's going to be likely to encourage, this kind of [abusive] behaviour. We do that work online, habitually without even thinking about it*. (Jacqueline, Academic at a UK university)

Some women felt that the measures that they had to employ to protect themselves and their loved ones from online harm were explicitly undermined by their employer or by others within their occupational sphere:

> *You're just constantly negotiating. If you are speaking publicly at a conference, you then ask can you take this photo in a certain way, and the amount of times I was at a public engagement and said please only photograph me straight on.*
>
> *And then, they put it on their social media feed, and I have asked people to take things down and then I've also had to negotiate this weird space where some people say, well what if I post it as an Instagram story, so it won't be traceable either, and if we also cut off part of your baby's face. With the kind of work that I do*[5]*, people want to almost exploit the fact that I'm working and have a baby attached, because it reflects well on them*. (Christie, Academic at a UK university)

Just like academics, local politicians mostly work alone and rarely have a staff team to support them or to triage their social media activity. The measures that Wendy had taken to protect her young family were similar to those taken by Jacqueline:

> *I've just had a baby. I won't put my child's picture online. I'll make sure that her face is always hidden. I'm very specific about not tweeting my location and things like that*. (Wendy, Local Councillor)

As discussed in Chapter Three, social media platforms and other technological resources are often harnessed in order to facilitate or perpetuate a campaign of gender-based harassment that originates in the offline space. Ranjit shared her experience:

> *He started with the insults, very early, with name calling. Then I started receiving hundreds of messages, initially only WhatsApp, and then he moved onto other platforms. There were messages most nights, saying that I was horrible, and he wanted to get rid of me and I was a prostitute. On the nights he didn't do it I felt wonderful in the morning because I didn't wake up to a hundred messages of insults. And when he realised that I wasn't answering his messages, I wasn't paying attention … that's where the real abuse started. So I had two violations of my personal data, my email and my Twitter account. In my Twitter account he found private conversations, took screen shots*

[5] *Research on Incels.*

> *of those, and published them on his Facebook*. (Ranjit, Academic at a European university)

Ranjit's account illustrates how perpetrators often use multiple platforms to disseminate online abuse (Rohlinger & Vaccaro, 2021), causing the maximum amount of emotional harm:

> *It was a continuous, with a growth of these messages every night. The final episode was on 16 July when I woke up to twelve new voice messages. I never listened to them. There were also eighty-six written WhatsApp messages. Because I had blocked him on Facebook a long time before … WhatsApp was the only possible way to harass me*. (Ranjit, Academic at a European university)

Threats

The majority of threats made online are overt and are specifically designed to provoke fear. It is within this dimension that online abuse most closely aligns with gender-based violence. In an echo of the gender-based violence that occurs in the physical space, the threats made online can take a multiplicity of forms. The different types of threat received ranged from blackmail to stalking and also included swatting, threats of physical and sexual violence, rape and death.

> *I've had threats saying … we have your private password information and will be hacking your accounts unless you do X. I had a very persistent series of messages that were very threatening, 'why aren't you answering me, I have access to your accounts, I'm sorry but now we're going to have to take over your accounts'*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

A reference to the offence of blackmail also appeared in one of the abusive tweets sent to the politician Tracy Brabin and collected as part of the analysis of Twitter storms. Blackmail also features in the literature on online abuse, with Henry and Powell (2015) including blackmail as one of the range of behaviours in their typology of technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment, explaining how 'email, the internet and mobile phone technologies are being used as a tool to harass, intimidate, humiliate, coerce and blackmail women' (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 115). Whilst Henry and Powell's (2015) focus is, like this research, on the role of online abuse in gender-based violence, their findings relate to intimate partner violence, specifically revenge porn; as opposed to women who receive online abuse as a consequence of their occupation, and the risk of blackmail appears smaller amongst those interviewed in this study. Similarly, work by Jane (2017a) reports the growth of blackmail related to revenge porn from former male partners; and the emergence of rape video blackmail, where a woman is subjected to sexual violence which is filmed, and with the victim then blackmailed with the threat of the video being released on the internet.

For some women, using social media in the course of their work had led to them becoming the target of behaviour that is akin to stalking:

> *On Facebook I was posting issues surrounding social justice and racism and a guy contacted me privately … and then he Googled me, found my office phone number from the department website … And then called me a couple of times just to chat about race. And that was, that was bad. I almost completely stopped answering my office phone because of it. It wasn't a face-to-face thing, but that was the first time that I've felt threatened, felt that my safety was threatened because of what I had said online*. (Eileen, Academic at a European university)

> *The worst situation I had was with one particular man who was prolific on social media within my area of interest, and I started receiving inappropriate messages privately, and pictures and … at the time, I didn't realise that what was happening was abusive and … exploitative, and manipulative. I slowly unravelled what was going on … what made me really upset was I found out he was also doing it to other women, who were far more vulnerable than me. It was really unpleasant, and quite targeted, and because his account was anonymous, he got away with it*. (Carol, Academic at a UK university)

> *I've had a couple of problems with stalkers. When I was working in Wisconsin in 2011 – I had a couple of right-wing folks, who knew I was working on the ground during protests, who set out to find me, to find my home … to find me in a crowd to harass me*. (Judith, Journalist based in the USA)

Some participants based in the USA recounted their experiences of 'swatting'. Swatting is the term applied to a crime which is relatively unheard of in the UK. It describes the act of 'falsely reporting people to the police so that SWAT teams descend on their homes' (Lukianoff, 2015, p. 48) and is most commonly used as a tactic in intimate partner violence (Wu, 2015). Whilst the incidence of swatting events occurring in this study was rare in comparison to other threats meted out online, the act contains such a huge potential for harm that it is worth recording here. Furthermore, and analogous to other forms of online abuse, there is evidence that the threat posed by swatting is greatest amongst women of colour and other minority groups:

> *I have called my police department to say there is the chance that I might be swatted. And that can be very dangerous and violent. If you are in a neighbourhood where most of the people are Black, swatting a target can get many people potentially hurt, killed or jailed. It's just the way the bias works. It's much more dangerous in a neighbourhood marginalised already*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

Despite the danger posed by swatting, the participants who were most concerned about becoming a target for the offence had found it hard to make their local police departments take their concerns seriously:

> *I called them up [the police] and I explained the situation and they literally said … we have nowhere in our system to record this! I wanted to say to them if you get a call trying to send a SWAT team to my house … ask some questions. Right? (laughs)* (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *When I called the police, I had to explain to them what swatting was, and why if someone made a distress call with my address, they needed to understand that's what may be happening*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

In contrast to the discussion on swatting, threats of physical violence remain an all-too-common feature of online abuse and were similarly the most common threat experienced by participants in this study:

> *The landscape of online misogyny and the real threat of violence moving off screen and on to the streets has heightened in the last couple of years. So, although I [now] get less abuse, I'm also more scared about my physical safety*. (Christie, Academic at a UK university)

> *Over the last three years or so, I've had all of these attacks, malicious communications, and I think there's been four cases of people found guilty. Suddenly they've got a platform so, they post a picture of a gallows with somebody hanging and my name next to it. There's been threats with guns … one person was trying to incite people to find out where I lived, it's just absolutely horrendous*. (Loretta, Member of Parliament)

> *Depending on whatever they're focused on at the time, the harassment is varied from Islamophobic because my name sounds like it's Arab, … if I write about race, it might be about hanging or lynching … a lot of pornography, which takes the form of either images or video*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *During the election [of December 2019] I received some of the worst abuse of anyone. Someone said they wanted to poison me with Ricin. And then they threatened to lock me in my house and bomb me and film me*. (Jill, Member of Parliament)

> *There's a fella that got three month's suspended sentence a few months back for making a threat on private messenger to me. He sent me a private message on Facebook, calling me a fucking*

> *tramp, and a slapper, and then threatened me … he said something else, he called me a couple of sentences of abuse and then he said, 'you're fucked'*. (Sherrie, Member of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly)

> *One example that stands out was when somebody said they wanted to see me on the end of a bayonet. That made me feel very uneasy*. (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

As the awareness of the online abuse targeted at women in public facing occupations has grown, those most intent on causing harm via the distribution of online threats of violence appear to have become more circumspect in their use of the various platforms. Many perpetrators are now careful not to use overtly violent terms, as they realise that the use of such language can attract the attention of filters or more formal regulatory sanctions from the various online platforms:

> *Abuse is … a lot more violent, a lot smarter, so they probably don't use words anymore, right, because they know we'll get them banned off the platform*. (Souad, Academic at a UK university)

Some of the most dangerous offenders do not use violent terminology at all, as Sue explained:

> *One of our biggest challenges with social media is context, because within the domestic violence space, often the threat is only really understood if you know the partner and you know the history. So, for example, an abusive partner might say 'on the day that I kill you, I'm going to deliver you roses'. And so, they might post a picture of roses on her Facebook page or tag her on Twitter. She's terrified. But that doesn't violate any of the terms and conditions of the social media platforms, because it's a picture of roses*. (Sue, Academic based in the USA)

This reiterates the importance of context, and why it is essential to have increased awareness of the potential for harm widely communicated to those responsible for online platforms, law enforcement and legislation.

Arguably, the clearest manifestation of misogyny in online abuse is exhibited through the making of threats of rape and sexual violence (Jane, 2016), which have become an all-too-common feature of online interaction for many women in public facing occupations. The research undertaken by Amnesty International (2017), coupled with testimony from the likes of Diane Abbott MP (Hansard, 2017), was echoed in the empirical research undertaken for this study:

> *The first time that I ever really felt that I suffered from it [online abuse] was very, very, very graphic descriptions of how people would harm and rape me. Going into really specific details about how they*

> *would do that, as if they'd really thought about it. And it's never really gone away*. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

> *Depending on what I'm working on, I get a lot of threats. I should be explicit that that includes rape threats and death threats*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *I get rape threats … I have no tolerance of them*. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)

Once again, the issue of race and gender intersects in the abuse that is generated when women speak out in the public sphere:

> *[Four years ago], I wrote an article in a newspaper … that article has been shared a hundred thousand times. It's been quoted, picked up etcetera by press across the world. It was about a movie … but within twenty-four hours … I was inundated with rape threats and death threats. Frankly, most people who write for newspapers don't have to worry about it. I do. And that's not because I'm writing for a newspaper, it's because I'm a migrant woman of colour in Britain, daring to criticise a British film. And that's the reality of it*. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

The presence of online abuse is viewed as so predictable by some that they have mechanised routines to manage it:

> *It's almost funny because I have this standing joke with my literary agent, that I keep a file on my computer. It's my standard death threats and rape threats file*. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

Whilst still the rarest form of threat made against women in politics (Krook, 2020), and despite being an offence under section 16 of the Offences Against the Person Act (1861), the Protection from Harassment Act (1997), section one of the Malicious Communications Act 1988, and section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 (CPS, 2016); several contributors to this study had received death threats via online channels:

> *I got stuff saying, 'she should be hung up', 'she should be in a body bag'. There was a stupid article [in a national newspaper] about how Brexit was going to lead to a crisis in body bags because they were made in the EU, so they were saying 'perfect for our MP' and all that sort of stuff*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *I haven't reported it [online abuse], even death threats. It's quite normal for journalists, and I've had death threats in the past, even before I became an author, when I was working for the BBC*. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

> *There's someone who wanted to … threatened to kill me with a machete*. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Whilst the women speaking here showed an enormous degree of resilience when faced with threats of abuse, violence and death, there is no doubt that receiving communication of this nature had an impact, which often endured long after the event:

> *There are certain things that I now associate with that first death threat … I wore an Apple watch up until that point and my Twitter notifications came through on my watch. I haven't had my watch on since that weekend, because death threats flashing up at you is not really something that … I don't want to wear that watch again*. (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The death of Jo Cox was a recurring topic in the interviews. Every participant without exception (including those based outside the UK) discussed the assassination of the Labour MP for Batley and Spen in West Yorkshire, by neo-Nazi Thomas Mair on 16 June 2016. Whilst evidence given at his trial showed that Mair had used the internet to both gather information about Cox and to plan his crime (Liem & Geelen, 2019), there is no indication that Mair targeted Cox with online abuse prior to killing her. Nevertheless, for all the women interviewed, the death of Jo Cox remains a shocking reminder of the vulnerability that they share. This was best summed up by Phyllis, who was a close friend and Parliamentary colleague of Jo's:

> *Listen … there was a reason it was Jo that was killed, you know. They didn't pick on a strapping six-foot bloke, did they? They went for a woman who dared to be strong and ferocious and brilliant and brave. They silenced her the only way they could. Misogyny runs through absolutely all of it*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

The threat of significant physical harm remains an ever-present danger for women in many public facing occupations. Despite this, women are still prepared to hold public office, irrespective of the risks that they face:

> *I'm much more scared of a world where this [online abuse] stops people coming forward than I am scared of a world where people come forward and might suffer it. I'm much more frightened of the bullies winning and taking over the playground. I'm willing to give my life to that. I'm much more frightened to sit down than I am to stand up because what sort of world would my kids grow up in if people don't keep putting themselves forward?* (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

Criticism of Physical Characteristics

The Twitter storms that were analysed for this project demonstrated that a significant amount of the abuse women receive online focuses on their appearance and other physical characteristics. The dominance of physical characteristics as a focus for the content of online abuse is further corroborated by interview evidence. This denigration is most pronounced in three areas: physical appearance, voice and age.

> *I get gendered hate speech; I get anti-Semitic hate speech and I get fatphobic hate speech*. (Judith, Journalist based in the USA)

The literature on online abuse confirms that appearance is frequently central to the abuse that women receive (e.g. Backe et al., 2018), primarily as a consequence of sexism and a wider misogyny (Jennings & Coker, 2019). This behaviour endures within public facing organisations with a strong occupational culture, such as policing (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2022). This appears to be particularly applicable to women in public facing occupations, whose occupational roles routinely expect them to interact with the media, or to have their image featured on publicity materials for their employer:

> *It's just an obsession with commentating on how you look all the time. I've had a group of trolls who became really obsessed with my front teeth. I've got really wonky front teeth, and every time I posted anything, they zoomed in on my teeth and circled them and commented on them. It was really quite bizarre*. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

> *I did something on ITV, and someone commented on my makeup. It seems minor, it's not really minor…. I think it's just a reality that people feel they can make a comment on your life, twenty-four-seven*. (Jill, Member of Parliament)

> *People who have a track record of disagreeing with you, criticise your appearance … I bet there wasn't a single word about a man and what they were wearing*. (Loretta, Member of Parliament)

As with other forms of online abuse, the targeting of women in public facing occupations for criticism or ridicule of their appearance was both frequent and unpredictable:

> *Just last night I had a guy email me insults about my weight, and then a really offensive picture, I didn't look at it*. (Judith, Journalist based in the USA)

One contributor mused that some women were targeted for online abuse more than others, drawing on her own experience:

> *I haven't had much. Well, apart from the odd comment telling me I'm ugly, or that I'm stupid. But I'm not like the others, like Jess Phillips or Diane Abbott. I don't know how some people get chosen as the target for abuse. Is it because they are younger and prettier than me?* (Agnes, Member of Parliament)

Sometimes, the focus on a woman's appearance has malevolent intent, driven by a desire to discredit or humiliate:

> *There are groups that focus on my appearance … when pictures have been taken of me in Downing Street they try and zoom in on my badge and try and catch you out to see if you've exposed something that you shouldn't expose, either about your body or the post*. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

> *They got [a photo] where I'm kind of looking down, and they took a screenshot that's all blurry, and made it look like I'm asleep in the Chamber, and then spread this thing that I was. And of course, other people start picking stuff like this up … it was horrific*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *I didn't think it possible that my hair would be discussed as much as it was. And then it manifested in that people felt the need to complain about me, make a complaint about me to the Police and Crime Commissioner. The bit that I remember more than anything else was that people said I've got no standards and I was letting the police down by the way I was dressed*. (Karen, Senior Police Officer)

The abuse that Karen referred to was also mentioned by other police officers in their discussions about online abuse:

> *How dare they judge her by her appearance when she's utterly capable and able? I felt very indignant about that. It was further evidence to me of the venom that there is and the incapacitating nature of that type of trolling*. (Stacey, Senior Police Officer)

The outrage articulated by Stacey on Karen's behalf evidences both the existence and benefit of mutual support networks frequently created by women in public facing occupations; an issue that is discussed further in Chapter Six.

A gendered focus on appearance was not limited to the UK:

> *I will never necessarily be acknowledged for who I really am, … I've lived in several different countries so I feel like my identity will always be pegged at that level of how I look rather than who I am*. (Nicole, Academic at a UK university)

Once again, the experiences of women of colour and minoritised groups were likely to generate even more abuse of this kind. Kerry frequently finds herself receiving racist abuse, instigated by her appearance, as she explained:

> *I think I've received more due to the fact that … I'm a woman and Black … and for wearing a hijab, I have as well. Something I tweeted came up and there was a xenophobic thing going on. It was nothing to do with people who care about anti-Semitism or xenophobia. It was just somebody picking on someone with a hijab on*. (Kerry, Local Councillor)

Smita, who like Kerry, is also a local Councillor, described how, as a Muslim woman, she felt that she had to deal with criticism of her appearance from all sides. Within hours of being elected in a marginal seat, she found herself on the receiving end of unpleasant comments from men purportedly within the Muslim community:

> *It [online abuse] got all negative because of me and my appearance. So, I wear my headscarf as a turban … and … I wear makeup. And the pictures that were going round, suddenly there was a huge amount of abuse from men, saying that I'm not covered enough. This was before I'd even started, before I'd even gone into the council to do any official work. The hate abuse that I got … just because of what I was wearing, with some people having the view that I was showing my face and I was wearing far too much makeup it was horrible, it was a really, really difficult time*. (Smita, Local Councillor)

In an example that highlights the multi-faceted nature of misogyny and that criticism of appearance can often hint at a more malign threat, Peggy offered the following example:

> *There was a bloke recently, sort of left-wing bloke who said to me that I need fucking to get my teeth fixed, that … a good fucking would fix my teeth*. (Peggy, Member of Parliament)

One interesting finding to emerge from the interviews was that even positive online interactions often focused wholly on a woman's appearance, rather than what she was saying or the role she was fulfilling, which the individuals concerned found frustrating:

> *I had a comment on the back of my telly appearances … people saying, oh, you've had a haircut, why don't you get something more girly and flattering*. (Beth, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *She would write a policy post, but the tweets and responses would be about how they didn't like her hair, or her dress, or her earrings, or her makeup, or the shoes she was wearing*. (Svetlana, Political Staffer)

This empirical evidence echoes the work of numerous studies that have emphasised how women politicians find their clothing and other aspects of their appearance the focus of much greater scrutiny than their male counterparts (e.g. Hayes et al., 2014).

Caroline recalled her experience of speaking in the emergency Parliamentary debate on the use of force in Syria, which took place in April 2018:

> *Obviously, it was very challenging, and I was in favour, and someone wrote to me asking where my dress was from. I've just given a speech about whether we should deploy troops, and one lady wants to know where my dress is from. So, really? You're not going to ask where a man's suit's from. And they think they're being really supportive, and you're like really?! Did I not actually make a difference to what you're paying attention to?* (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

When considering the online abuse related to physical features that is received by women in public facing occupations, their voice is a prominent target. This has echoes with older (pre-internet) research, with Beard (2015) highlighting how public speaking has been viewed as the very essence of masculinity since (at least) the Second Century AD, emphasising how a deep and powerful voice was frequently perceived as a 'defining attribute of maleness' (Beard, 2015, p. 812). Similarly, the criticism of Margaret Thatcher's voice, which was described as 'shrill' (Wilson & Irwin, 2015, p. 23) when she was elected Leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 (Blundell, 2008), precipitated the now famous intervention by her advisors that led to her undertaking a series of lessons to make her voice seem 'firmer and more powerful' (Coffè, 2020, p. 423). Some have argued that the efforts that were made to modify Thatcher's voice to make her sound 'more like a man' (Grebelsky-Lichtman & Katz, 2019, p. 701) were an integral part of her election success (Wilson & Irwin, 2015), with others believing that the distinctive nature of her voice acted as a clarion for the many organisations and individuals who were vehemently opposed to her political agenda (Shaw, 2018). Whilst the modification of Thatcher's voice is now an integral part of her narrative, few male voices have been subjected to such detailed and enduring public scrutiny.

The intervening decades have not done much to alter the criticism of how women's voices sound. A number of politicians recounted their own experiences:

> *People would comment on my voice being too high, or [that I] speak too fast*. (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

Agita identified a very gendered difference in the way that women's articulation is perceived:

> *There is a difference in what you get called … a man is strong, and a woman is sort of breathy or shouty … and it's like very subtle use of language that I really worry about*. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)

As an aside, it is interesting to note that in their analysis of mixed gender presidential campaigns, Grebelsky-Lichtman and Katz (2019) found that if women are perceived as too masculine (like Hillary Clinton), voters think they are competent, but dislike them; whilst if they are perceived as too feminine (like Sarah Palin), voters like them but do not believe them to be competent. The explanation offered by this study is that institutionalised misogyny means that women in public facing occupations, whether in politics, policing, journalism or academia, are criticised – on both social media platforms and in traditional media outlets; however they present themselves.

Age and ageing were also weaponised by perpetrators engaging in online abuse, as the criticism of older women became yet another target for the opprobrium of physical characteristics.

> *Something about being a woman in a senior position, I think is one thing, rarely do you see that abuse directed at men who just happen to be grey and wrinkly. If there was a senior policeman who was grey and wrinkly, I don't think it'd get mentioned. yet women who are in senior positions, it seems ok to either go, 'cor, she's hot stuff', could be at one end of the spectrum couldn't it, and that would seem appropriate, or at the other end, you know, whatever amount of abuse you want to dish out, as to how somebody looks*. (Samantha, Senior Police Officer)

This is consistent with the work of Pickard (2020) and Lewis (2020), who both highlight the castigation of older women as an essential component of modern misogyny; whilst also echoing the ageist abuse directed at the politician Tracy Brabin uncovered by the analysis of the Twitter data corpus. Research by Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2022) adds a further dimension to this area of abuse. In a study that considers the attitudes of serving police officers in Iceland, they discovered that young men, especially those newly recruited, were the group most likely to hold sexist attitudes towards female colleagues. It is proposed that this occurs as a consequence of these officers seeking to reassert male dominance within policing, fearing that any move towards greater equality could pose a threat to their own occupational advancement (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2022). It may also be the wider consequence in the growth in popularity of openly misogynistic online figureheads such as Andrew Tate (Ging, 2023).

Caroline's experience neatly emphasises how the different facets of physical appearance are frequently weaponised in online abuse. She highlighted how the anti-Semitic abuse that she and three parliamentary colleagues had received had targeted different aspects of their appearance for denigration:

> *[Individual One] … got horrendous abuse, awful, awful abuse, and out of everybody got the worst out of all four of us … but [Individual Two] and [Individual Three] get ageist gendered abuse. So, they get a three-level hit, and [Individual Three] is very upfront about that.*

> *So, mine will be sexualised; [Individual One's] really was, you know, she's a beautiful woman, so hers would be sexualised, and gendered, but much more sexualised, and racist, but they would bring [Individual Two and Individual Three's] age into it*.
>
> *The men [male Jewish MPs] never got any of it. It was very much about the four women …* (Caroline, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

Camp (2018) demonstrates how the belittling of victims is an integral part of gender-based violence within the domestic sphere. This study has confirmed that this is similarly evidenced in the online abuse that women serving in public facing occupations regularly receive.

> *You know nothing, you're just a dafty lassie who couldn't hack it in politics …* (Julia, Politician in Scotland)

Julia provides a striking example of the online abuse she received, the purpose of which was to undermine and belittle her work as a politician. This type of online abuse is different from other examples provided in this chapter, as it contains no obscenities, or any other overtly discriminatory tropes that can be identified as abuse by either text filters or human moderators. Nevertheless, this type of malign communication has the clear purpose of undermining public confidence in women tasked with making important decisions, and consequently, it can be hugely damaging. As more than one participant remarked, this type of abuse is pernicious and is rarely directed at men:

> *Take sexism. All the obvious stuff we can deal with, all the obvious bullying, you can deal with that. But the problem with social media abuse is that so much of it is really low level. Just grinding sexism. When you see women on Twitter and they're in positions of authority, or positions of expertise and then some fucking bloke will pop up and go, well yes, but really …. and that's a form of abuse*. (Rose, Academic based in the USA)
>
> *You have to balance the benefit of tweeting out and informing people about what we are up to as an organisation, against being the subject of ridicule and abuse. I think there's this army of armchair warriors, mainly looking out for women who are opinionated and intelligent … looking to comment in a negative way*. (Stacey, Senior Police Officer)
>
> *I think there is more of an attempt on Twitter to humiliate women than men. Absolutely humiliate them by making them feel worthless*. (Patricia, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *Something I've been subjected to is, and this has been offline as well as online, is 'God this is what happens when you put a woman in charge'*. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

Agita summed up what she believed were the potential consequences of the incessant belittling and undermining of women were:

> *It's like women are worthless, that they have no value, so they can just be raped and abused and just calling them a fucking cunt online is ok*. (Agita, Member of the House of Lords)

Silencing Women's Voices

The silencing of women's voices as a demonstration of misogyny has a long history (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Beard, 2017). One example of how online abuse is used in an attempt to silence women – through criticism of the sounds of their voices – has already been discussed. In addition, there are three further ways that silencing can be exhibited. These methods may be overt and unmistakable, as Kerry demonstrated:

> *Because I have an opinion, he's trying to shut me up. But what happened was, in that panic, you feel helpless, you know? His motivation [for the abuse] was to silence me, to scare me, to say that you're weak*. (Kerry, Local Councillor)

However, sometimes, the bid to silence is more implicit, with the pressure exerted on an individual to moderate their contribution in the online space:

> *I think the structural impact is similar to the ways that women have been silenced throughout history. It creates an effect where women are more afraid to speak out, more afraid to stick their necks out, more afraid to give opinions, more afraid to occupy political office or positions of authority. And I think that this effect is in tandem with what happens in women's real life lives, where women are not heard*. (Tiprat, Academic based in the USA)

> *I think a lot of what they do is to try and discourage you from doing the kind of reporting you do. Ultimately what they're trying to do is discourage you from covering the topic which is criticising them*. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

> *To me there's no difference between online and real life, I mean, all our cities, all our villages, all our roads, all our public spaces are meant to exclude women. So, any space therefore we occupy is despite the best efforts and despite the design. It's not because they were made for us*. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

As has been illustrated elsewhere, the impact of being silenced is not experienced equally, with women of colour and other disadvantaged groups more likely to be targeted, replicating their experiences in the offline environment:

> *This is something that I think most of us – especially a lot of women of colour – were very aware of from day one, and we have been arguing about it and writing about it. Unsurprisingly, nobody listens to us. Nobody listens to women, and women of colour even less*. (Emma, Academic at a UK university)

> *The structural impact is very clearly that women, people of colour, trans folks, Jews, all of us are hesitant to speak when folks in the majority are not hesitant … and so structurally, it has a silencing effect*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *It ultimately drives women and people of colour offline and out of the conversation. So much of our political and social discourse takes place online, but for so many people, harassment just reaches a point where it's just not worth it, so they end up taking their voice out of the conversation. Which, by the way, is generally the intention. The idea is to drive women and people of colour offline*. (Judith, Journalist based in the USA)

The data also identified a feeling that women are less likely to be asked to contribute to online discussions: yet another way that women are being excluded:

> *One thing I think can be tricky with social media, is the bias by omission, which is tricky to prove as they've not actually had a go at you, but you're cut out of the conversation. Or you're cut out of the coverage. And I think that happens to women more often*. (Lauren, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *Women are much more circumspect around their activity, about what they are prepared to share … and what they're prepared to comment on. In my experience, women's voices are quieter*. (Imogen, Senior Police Officer)

The silencing of women has a greater consequence than simply removing the voices of influential women from the online space. For the act of silencing may also prevent women from forming the networks that are essential to both tackling online abuse and successfully progressing on their chosen career path:

> *It absolutely keeps us from entering public conversations or exerting our full power in public conversations, but it also keeps us from connecting with each other. And it stops us using these tools to connect*

> *with each other … to organise, or just to get social support and build connections. Structurally, this kind of harassment keeps us afraid of connecting. Or it creates high costs to pay for attempting to connect*. (Sophie, Academic and Journalist, USA)

> *My concern is that there are obstacles, multicultural barriers to women in authority, and this level of hostility intensifies everything. And we already know that girls who have been watching are inhibiting themselves*. (Ann, Academic and Journalist, USA)

The women participants in this study revealed how the abuse that they had received, and that they had witnessed other women experience, became a mechanism for self-censorship, leading some women to withdraw from the online space:

> *I've definitely turned down things because I don't want to get abuse. Or I've minced my words or tone-policed a bit … And also, by being off social media, I am probably missing opportunities as well*. (Souad, Academic at a UK university)

> *If I tweet and then people are scornful or sarcastic, then friends and family can see that, and that's an inhibiting factor isn't it?* (Stacey, Senior Police Officer)

> *I've been careful, which has avoided a lot of abuse I could have got. But I've also restricted how much I've engaged online. There are things I wouldn't say because I know I will get attacked*. (Michelle, Journalist based in the UK)

> *I just keep my head down. I'm very clear on that. I'm very careful about what I tweet. There are certain issues I won't touch with a bargepole, even though I have thoughts and opinions Because it's too dangerous. I've been doing this now for eleven years, and from day one it was like, do not engage in anything controversial because it is too fucking dangerous*. (Rose, Academic based in the USA)

There were participants across all four occupational groups who had withdrawn from social media, as a result of the online abuse that they had received:

> *I no longer use Twitter in a professional capacity … because of the online abuse I received in the past*. (Anna, Police Officer)

The evidence provided by Anna highlights an unintended consequence of the police using social media as a mechanism for communicating with the public (Walby & Joshua, 2021). As O'Connor (2017) confirms, by using online platforms as a way of providing information, individual officers may find themselves in the position of being 'risk communicators' (O'Connor, 2017, p. 900), which in turn jeopardises their safety and wellbeing.

> *The way I handled [online abuse] was, I started shutting myself off. When things got loud and messy, and it felt that the landscapes were shifting, I just made my accounts private*. (Nicole, Academic at a UK university)

Many women found themselves considering whether the benefits they gained from engaging in the online space was worth the emotional labour it demanded.

> *There's a couple of MPs I spoke to, [named current Parliamentarian] I think she said when she went on maternity leave, she went off Twitter, and she's never gone back … and I was just like wow! Because actually you don't have to [use social networks]. I think now that there's more people just making that conscious choice*. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *Twitter, which I was on until a month ago … discourse there has degraded over time. It's become more vitriolic. Abuse has become more open. I think partly because the platform allows it. On the day I left I had someone offering to punch me in the throat, and Twitter said it wasn't in violation of their rules, that's when I thought I'm not going to be on this platform*. (Linda, UK-based journalist)

> *When I withdraw, there's several reasons for it. When I can't control it … it's just too much effort … it becomes a full-time job trying to keep up with your social media presence, and that's not where my interest lies, I just don't have enough hours in the day. Then it's too much noise, I would prefer to be heard in a different way*. (Nicole, Academic at a UK university)

> *I remember saying to friends, it's like being in an abusive relationship and if I saw a friend of mine like that I'd say get out, you're better than this, you don't have to put yourself through this, no one should have this just because they're trying to do their job*. (Phyllis, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

But the decision to withdraw from the online space was not without consequence, both personal and professional.

> *I left Facebook when the birth of my daughter coincided with a documentary I put out on the BBC … as I had some safety issues around that. The safest thing was to shut down Facebook. Then I had a baby and I wanted to engage with other young mums in my area and it became almost impossible for me to engage in baby programming without having a Facebook account*. (Christie, Academic at a UK university)

> *Many people would be personally affected by some of the things that have been said to me. I did withdraw. I stopped doing things online for a couple of months. I've gone a bit quiet on Twitter and [my followers] say please come back. I don't post huge amounts. I have considered withdrawing completely, but it's expected of me in my job, I think*. (Samantha, Senior Police Officer)

The opposing demands of career obligations and emotional wellbeing meant that occasional breaks from social media were more common than complete withdrawal, giving women the opportunity to prioritise their mental health, whilst still maintaining a presence in the online space.

> *I had a three month pause from Twitter and Instagram, I just had so much more time. You realise that if you don't go onto social media, you feel so much better. Regardless of abuse, I'm very rarely looking at Twitter or Insta right now*. (Charmaine, Member of Parliament until December 2019)

> *I have had colleagues say to me that if they were me, they would have shut down the account by now because you shouldn't put up with this level of abuse. But I've never got to the stage with Twitter where I've thought I'll withdraw completely. But there have been periods of time where I've just gone a bit quieter, where I've just felt that the public noise and angst has risen to a point when I thought I don't actually want to be in the middle of this frenzy. Then I've gone a bit quieter and just retweeted stuff*. (Sarah, Senior Police Officer)

These accounts illustrate how silencing is used against women in public facing occupations, as an integral part of the misogyny that underpins online abuse. Silencing is different from other forms of online abuse, as it often operates in an insidious manner, coercing women to silence themselves or remove themselves from the conversation by leaving the online space. Unlike some of the other elements of online abuse discussed in this chapter, the silencing of women's voices is multi-faceted and can be demonstrated both overtly and implicitly. What is interesting is how women have sought their own coping strategies to deal with this dimension of misogyny, whether by forming alliances with other women or by changing the way that they communicate online.

Mapping Twitter Data to the Seven Elements of Online Abuse

This chapter opened by presenting details of three Twitter storms. Before concluding this chapter, there is a value in returning to this corpus, to illustrate how individual tweets displayed the same seven elements of online abuse. This is provided in Fig. 9.

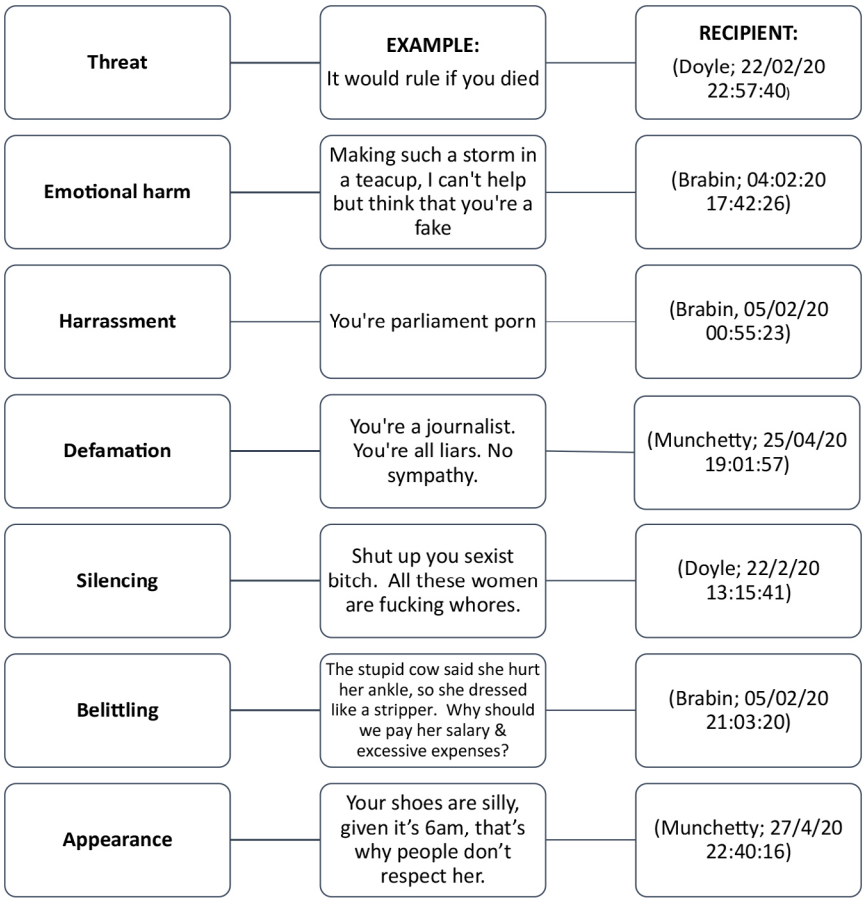

Fig. 9. Examples of Tweets in Each of the Seven Categories of Online Abuse.

Conclusion

This chapter contains a huge amount of detail about the online abuse directed at women working in public facing occupations and the associations that exist between online abuse and gender-based violence. By viewing online abuse through the seven separate lenses of defamation, emotional harm, harassment, criticism of physical characteristics, belittling, silencing and threat, the true enormity of the situation faced by women working across the public sphere can be appreciated. This study is the first to present empirical data from the four professions of academia, journalism, policing and politics in one place and to use this information to provide a comprehensive understanding of online abuse delivered to women in these professions.