

The impact of online misogyny on women's participation: democracy experts respond

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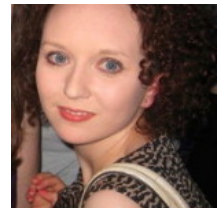
By Democratic Audit UK

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Many women, including a number of high-profile British politicians, have been the targets of misogynistic abuse via social media. Democratic Audit recently [featured an article](#) by Laura Bates, arguing that this trend has negative effect on rates of female participation in public life. In this post we ask leading democracy and gender experts to respond, sharing their experiences and views on how misogyny undermines democracy.

Claire McGing, Lecturer in Political Geography at the National University of Ireland, Noyamouth

At a recent political science conference I attended an (all-male) roundtable discussion on 'new media' and politics in Northern Ireland which got me thinking about women's political engagement, or rather their under-engagement, online. With rates of 'traditional' participation like voter turnout in decline, many consider social media a 'new dawn' for democracy. Citizens can now express an opinion, canvass a politician, and so on without leaving their armchair. Yet, online participation is not as inclusive as one might think. User demographics bear markedly similar (gendered) patterns to electoral politics – studies show how men constitute the majority of 'shouters', while women 'lurk' in the background.



Why? Problematically, political new media is, in itself, infiltrated with highly masculinist norms. First, debates online are often more aggressive than a face-a-face deliberation – when you can't see the person you're attacking it's easier to make personal, even highly abusive, comments. As Laura highlights, women, both elites and non-elites, are subjected to this at a much greater rate than men. Second, research reveals how women prefer a more consensual, collaborative approach to deliberation – hardly words we would use to describe most online political forums! Little wonder, then, women tend to 'lurk' in the background, or sometimes participate in 'women-only' spheres. Is it time for a women's political web forum in the UK?

Dr Rainbow Murray, Reader in Politics at Queen Mary, University of London

Online misogyny is real, and highly corrosive of women's participation in public life. If we do not silence those who perpetrate this abuse, we instead silence women. One example of this is [Caroline Criado-Perez](#), who campaigned successfully to ensure that at least one of the banknotes in circulation featured a woman. The threats of rape and violence that ensued on twitter became so intimidating that even someone as courageous and outspoken as her was forced into silence by closing her Twitter account. Others who witnessed this high-profile case will no doubt think twice before daring to air an opinion in future.



Even though most of us are repulsed by threats of rape or domestic violence, we should not underestimate the impact of negative media coverage and stereotypes in influencing our everyday

thinking. From the way we educate our children to the way we evaluate job candidates, stereotypes and unconscious sexism permeate every aspect of our lives. This holds back women in two ways: it causes society to underestimate women, and it causes women to underestimate themselves, thus stifling their ambition. As long as powerful women are publicly demeaned, trivialised and even threatened, the socially enforced silencing of women will continue.

Caroline Thorpe, freelance journalist

Misogynistic comments are a nasty form of bad speech, an inevitable product of freedom of expression. Unpleasant though it is when bad speech is aired it does, at least, put it in plain sight. Yet a problem remains: those who wish to challenge such speech are hamstrung.



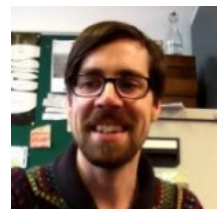
Laura Bates rightly highlights the chilling effect which freely expressed misogyny has on women's own right to speak. And it's not just women who are affected. As a freelance journalist I am aware of a tendency, among female and male colleagues, to shy away from 'excessive' contribution to the gender debate for fear of becoming too closely identified with the issues. Whether real or imagined, there is a sense that too much gender talk can limit your professional outlook.

The solution? First we must recognise the contribution of Bates, Caroline Criado-Perez, *Stella Creasy* and the many others who challenge misogyny on our behalf. Then we should join them. In the best-selling '*Lean In*', Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg relates that when women achieve a critical mass in a previously male-dominated environment, 'the negativity and the grumbling [towards them] die down'.

The choice is this: either more of us speak out now, or let the misogynists continue to bind us.

Dr Ben Pitcher, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Westminster

The recent spate of misogynistic online threats, provocations, and abuse should of course be subject to unequivocal condemnation. The public spaces of social media are an intrinsic part of our contemporary cultures, and feminist struggles do not stop at the borders of the virtual world.

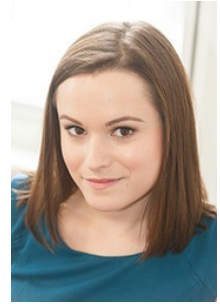


And yet the character of this anti-feminist vitriol tells us something significant about where it is coming from. Its viscerality and excessiveness is not a marker of power, but of weakness. These are the words of men who have already lost the argument. They are the outpourings of bad losers.

In the past, feminism had its PR problems: it was itself rejected as unpopular and excessive. Today feminism is in the ascendant, appealing to increasing numbers of young people. Feminism is cool, desirable, resonant, empowered, undismissable. This, we should remember, is the context for all that hateful misogyny: it is symptomatic of the recognition that feminism is going to win.

Laura Wilkes, Head of Policy & Research at the New Local Government Network (NLGN)

Laura Bates is right to outline the link between online misogyny and women's democratic participation. The fact is, that the online sphere is yet another platform that struggles to hear women's voices. Your confidence to speak out online is severely hampered if you face a barrage of hatred and abuse for merely expressing a political opinion.



Of course, the brilliance of the online space is its immediacy and accessibility. But these are the very same elements that make scrutiny and criticism online easier and more open. In local government in particular, the lines between on and offline spaces are not so clearly delineated. Those women who are blogging and tweeting tend to be doing so about the place they live – the same therefore often applies for those who send abuse back. When comments become abusive online, this could have local consequences offline.

Some may say that the answer is to boycott. But wouldn't this seek to further alienate women, further silence their voices and make participation even harder? Regulating 'free speech' is clearly a difficult territory in which to step, but continuing to put pressure on websites and forums where women's voices are absent and abuse is tolerated must be part of the answer.

Dr Meryl Kenny, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Leicester

The issue of online misogyny has increasingly hit the headlines – including the recent [UN Women ads](#) highlighting gender discrimination in Google search terms, the [campaign](#) against pro-rape Facebook pages, the rape and death threats directed at women on Twitter including Caroline Criado-Perez and [Mary Beard](#) among others, and the efforts to catalogue daily stories of sexism (both online and off) through initiatives such as the [Everyday Sexism](#) project. Much of the resulting commentary has focused on issues of freedom of speech and censorship – but the central issue at play here is one of gender equality. The repeated online harassment of women on the basis of their sex reinforces their (perceived) secondary status and attempts to silence women's speech in public spaces.



This also raises wider questions about continuing hostility towards women in the public sphere. In the UK, for example, women continue to be politically underrepresented in politics, in business, in the media. Women politicians worldwide continue to face misogynistic treatment – the sexualized and often violent attacks aimed at Australia's first female prime minister Julia Gillard offer a disturbing recent example. Challenging sexist treatment is important – as Gillard did in her now-famous '[misogyny speech](#)' – in order to expose discrimination and encourage other women to take up political careers. But it also shows the substantial progress still to be made on gender equality.

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