

SUMMARY
OF THE E-DISCUSSION ON

**ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN IN POLITICS**

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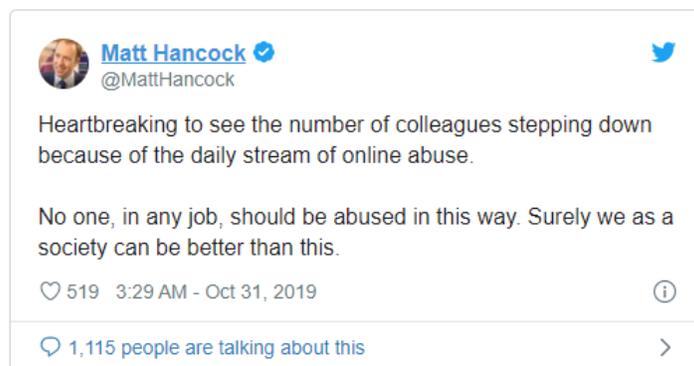
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LAUNCHING MESSAGE

Background



The United Kingdom's Health Secretary is one of many political figures that recently expressed their dismay at the number of women Members of Parliament (MPs) who renounced standing for re-election to Parliament and decided to leave politics after citing rising online harassment and abuse. Recent reports show similar trends in many other countries, such as the [United States](#), [India](#), [Kenya](#), and [Colombia](#).

Politics is a hostile environment to women everywhere. An Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) global [study](#) published in 2016 and a 2018 [study](#) focused on European countries found that violence against women MPs is very widespread, with varying prevalence in different regions and countries of the world. According to IPU's research, psychological violence -- which includes sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, intimidation and threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction -- is the most common form of violence women MPs face, affecting more than 80% of the global survey respondents. It also suggests that digital communication is the main tool used to deliver threats of death, rape and beatings against female MPs and that most perpetrators are anonymous users. Moreover, IPU reports that 58% of the European study respondents and 42% of those in the global study received online sexist attacks on social media, notably Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Online violence is a phenomenon of pandemic proportion as reports suggest that almost three quarters of women Internet users worldwide have experienced some form of online violence.¹ Online presence, mainly through social media, can be described as a double-edged sword for women politicians:² while it is a unique and extremely useful tool to directly communicate with constituencies and to mobilize support and engagement, it provides a forum where violence can proliferate with impunity.

A forthcoming research study³ based on social media trends analysis in seven countries (Zimbabwe, Haiti, Afghanistan, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine) reveals growing online incivility, hate speech, and overt violence against women in politics. It reports little regulation and widespread impunity and concludes there is a real negative effect on women's freedom of expression and political participation. Online and offline violence against women in politics is a violation of human rights and, by hindering

¹ Cyber Violence against Women and Girls - A report by the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on broadband and Gender, Page 2. 2015: en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/genderreport2015final.pdf

² #SHEPERSISTED: Women, Politics & Power in the New media World, Page 23. 2019: she-persisted.org/

³ Defending Democracy in Digital Spaces: Ending Violence Against Women in Politics Online. IFES, forthcoming.

women's political participation, is also a violation of women's political rights. As such, it undermines democratic exercise and good governance and creates a democratic deficit.⁴

Objective

This e-Discussion raised awareness on the online harassment, abuse, and violence against women in politics by encouraging a dialogue and an exchange of knowledge, experiences, and solutions to fight this phenomenon and ensure online and political spaces are safe and inclusive. Women and men in politics, civil society activists, practitioners and researchers were invited to join this e-Discussion from 9 to 30 March 2020. The submissions contributed to the elaboration of the Consolidated Reply below, augmenting the knowledge base available on the topic.

Questions

1. Why do you think online harassment and abuse of women in politics occurs and is so widespread?
2. What can States do to stop online harassment and violence against women while respecting freedom of expression and the prohibition of incitation to violence and hatred? What are the good practices?
3. What can social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram do to make their spaces safe for women?
4. Online violence against women in politics makes political careers unattractive. What message would you give to women who are considering leaving politics or discouraged from engaging in public life because of this?

CONTRIBUTORS

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to participate in this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices, and recommendations. The following participants joined the e-Discussion:

1. [Abir Chebaro](#), Advisor to the President of the Council of Ministers on Women's Affairs, **Lebanon**
2. [Ameena Al-Rasheed](#), iKNOW Politics Expert, Consultant, former Assistant Professor and UN Regional Advisor, **United Kingdom**
3. [Armando Ribón Avilán](#), Sociologist, **Colombia**
4. [Jossif Ezekilov](#), Program Officer on Gender, Women and Democracy, National Democratic Institute of International Affairs (NDI), **United States**
5. [Liri Kopaçi-Di Michele](#), Head of Secretariat, Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, **France**
6. [Lucina Di Meo](#), Senior Director of Girls' Education and Gender Equality at Room to Read, **Italy**
7. [Mariam Diawara](#), iKNOW Politics user
8. [Marisol Espinoza Cruz](#), Former Congresswoman and former Vice President of the Republic, **Peru**
9. [Rosalee Keech](#), League of Women Voters (LWVUS), **United States**
10. [Saskia Larissa Noriega](#), Engineer, CECE - National Forum of Political Parties, **Panama**

⁴ United Nations, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on violence against women in politics", para 11. August 2018. See also UN Women, "Violence against women in politics: Expert Group Meeting report and recommendations", 2018, and NDI, Not The Cost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics, 2016.

11. [Silvia López Prieto](#), Intern at International IDEA, **Sweden**
12. [Terry I.](#), iKNOW Politics user

SUMMARY

1. Why do you think online harassment and abuse of women in politics occurs and is so widespread?

All participants agree that online harassment and abuse of women in politics is widespread and need urgent, swift, and coordinated action to stop. Women's political engagement and leadership has deeply disrupted the traditional ways of doing politics and violence against women leaders is seen as a backlash to women's incremental participation and leadership in public life.

Women in politics disrupt the old boys' club as they shake the status quo by influencing priorities, shaping policies, and changing nations, according to [Lucina Di Meco](#). She argues that women's political leadership is transformative and, like nothing else in the world, has the power to challenge patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes and beliefs. It is then not surprising to see some of those who benefit from the status quo mobilizing and organizing politically motivated attacks and gendered disinformation campaigns to prevent women from reaching and staying in leadership positions, notes [Lucina Di Meco](#).

Online spaces are fertile ground for harassment and abuse. Online violence against women in politics (OVAWP) is part of the larger spectrum of violence against women, which is deeply rooted in inequality, sexism, patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and a culture of intolerance and impunity, notes [Liri Kopaçi-Di Michele](#). Online harassment is defined by [Saskia Larissa Noriega](#) as a situation in which an individual is repeatedly attacked through an online medium with the goal of undermining self-esteem and personal dignity, damaging social status and credibility, and causing psychological and emotional stress.

According to participants, attacks include insults, ridicule, intimidation, threats, extortion, doxing, identity theft, deepfakes, and revenge porn. Many of these new forms of violence created in the digital era are disproportionately used against women in politics, argues [Jossif Ezekilov](#). He notes that harassment and abuse of women in politics online is a reflection of the discrimination and inequality that women in politics have always faced offline and that it is used by bad-faith actors to silence women and discourage them from engaging in public life. [Liri Kopaçi-Di Michele](#) reports an increase of violence against women in politics (VAWP), both online and offline. To her, these drivers are often perpetrated and reinforced by the media and social networks.

The unprecedented expansive reach of social media platforms has enabled and magnified the effects of VAWP, argues [Jossif Ezekilov](#). Citing an NDI [document](#), he adds that OVAWP is an old problem that has been given a new and more toxic life and notes that social media makes the impact of online harassment and abuse seem anonymous, borderless, and sustained, thereby undermining women's sense of personal security in ways not experienced by men. [Ameena Al-Rasheed](#) adds that given how content regulation is difficult on social media spaces, they have become the most accessible forums to undermine, harass, and abuse women in politics with impunity.

Reporting the [findings](#) of a UN discussion paper, [Silvia López Prieto](#) shares that despite the increase of online violence against women, only 26% of law enforcement agencies in 86 surveyed countries take appropriate action. She adds that widespread impunity has significant consequences. Not only does it encourage perpetrators to continue their attacks, it also discourages victims to report acts of violence. An

Inter-parliamentary Union [study](#) found that 58.2% of the women in parliaments in Europe have suffered online violence but only 20% of them filed complaints. Moreover, sharing Amnesty International findings, [Silvia López Prieto](#) reports that two thirds of women who experience harassment on social media feel powerless and embarrassed as a consequence. This feeling increases when the threat involves spreading sexual or intimate photographs or videos without consent.

[Marisol Espinoza Cruz](#) argues that online violence is a phenomenon faced by women who express different or unpopular opinions. [Rosalee Keech](#) adds that OVAWP is an attempt to silence women in politics, making it a significant barrier to women's right to free speech and participation in politics and public life. Sharing findings of an NDI [case study](#) on online harassment, [Jossif Ezekilov](#) backs this claim, noting that instances of online violence during political discourse were followed by a measurable decrease in women users' Twitter engagement in Kenya and Colombia.

2. What can States do to stop online harassment and violence against women while respecting freedom of expression and the prohibition of incitation to violence and hatred? What are the good practices?

The year 2020 celebrates important milestones for gender equality. [Abir Chebaro](#) reminds that it marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, considered a groundbreaking and comprehensive roadmap on women's rights, and the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by all countries. [SDG 5](#) on gender equality targets "ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" as well as "eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres" by 2030.

Participants agree that States have a responsibility and an essential role to play in fighting all forms of violence against women and ensuring their full and equal participation in politics and public life. States have the duty to prevent acts of violence against women, investigate them when they occur, prosecute and punish the perpetrators, and provide reparation and relief to the victims, reminds [Saskia Larissa Noriega](#). States must also protect freedom of speech, an important pillar of democratic systems. Effective laws governing this freedom must account for and protect human rights, as [Jossif Ezekilov](#) notes that one's freedom of expression stops when it abuses the human rights of others.

All forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including OVAWP, is a blatant abuse of human rights and must be treated for what it is – a crime. [Jossif Ezekilov](#) shares that the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women recommended in her recent [report](#) on online violence to the UN Human Rights Council that "human rights and women's rights protected offline must also be protected online." He argues that States need to develop legal frameworks, policies, and measures to prevent acts of violence and support victims on the premise that VAWP is human rights abuse and a barrier to a free and inclusive democratic process.

For policies and measures to be effective, data collection and analysis are needed, argues [Jossif Ezekilov](#). Sharing the example of an incident report [form](#) developed by NDI to collect testimonies of women in politics affected by violence, he suggests that States should use a similar system to ensure acts of VAWP are reported, as are other crimes. In this context, he says that recording and tracking acts of OVAWP must account for the constantly shifting nature of online spaces, and in particular the use of language and idioms online. The NDI report [Tweets that Chill](#) shows how localized lexicons (Bahasa for Indonesia,

Colombian Spanish, and a mix of Swahili and English in Kenya) of political and harassment language can be developed for a contextualized examination of OVAWP.

Women around the world use the internet on average 12% less than men, with the gap widening to 32% in the least developed countries, claims [Lucina Di Meco](#). To her, governments should prioritize closing the gender gap in internet access and promote digital literacy to ensure users become conscious content consumers and creators and able to identify bias and call it out. [Liri Kopaçi-Di Michele](#) agrees that digital awareness and literacy among users are essential, noting that codes of conduct and complaints mechanisms should be put in place to reinforce responsible behavior online. [Rosalee Keech](#) adds that codes of conduct within institutions must account for VAWP and OVAWP, especially within political parties, parliaments, and government bodies.

Many States have established successful and promising policies and practices to prevent or counteract violence against women, recalls [Saskia Larissa Noriega](#). She shares that common aspects of successful State plans include: the promulgation of clear policies and laws; the establishment of powerful mechanisms for law enforcement; well-trained and motivated staff; the participation of many sectors; and direct collaboration with local women's groups, civil society organizations, academic circles, and professionals in the field. Many participants reiterate this last recommendation, agreeing that all State strategies should promote women's agency and rely on the experiences and participation of women, as well as partnerships civil society organizations and tech companies to properly address this issue.

[Abir Chebaro](#) and [Lucina Di Meco](#) share the example of Bolivia's 2012 groundbreaking law on VAWP, which includes psychological threats and harassment, both offline and online. In 2013, Mexico revised its existing law on violence against women to include a provision accounting for VAWP, reports [Lucina Di Meco](#). She also shares that a number of European countries have introduced regulations against sexist and hate speech. The European Union has even established guidelines urging tech companies to remove content inciting hatred and violence within one hour of posting. Further, the Council of Europe addressed VAWP through a wide range of measures and strategies, such as the 2011 Istanbul Convention and the Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2020, she adds. [Liri Kopaçi-Di Michele](#) refers to a recent [report](#) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for some concrete measures and recommendations to ensure parliaments are free of sexism and sexual harassment, such as training, awareness raising, effective and confidential reporting mechanisms, and data collection and monitoring.

However, [Lucina Di Meco](#) concludes that progress is slow and respect for these measures, as well as enforcement and accountability, are limited. Participants agree with this observation and urge States to enforce policies and guarantee transparency and accountability. [Marisol Espinoza Cruz](#) calls for safe public and political spaces and online networks that guarantee inclusion for healthy and sustainable democracies.

3. What can social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram do to make their spaces safe for women?

Participants agree that States and women's groups alone cannot make real lasting change on OVAWP without the cooperation of social media companies, who can no longer credibly claim neutrality when confronted with the misuses and abuses of their platforms. To [Silvia López Prieto](#), these companies must guarantee their spaces are safe for everyone, including women. To [Jossif Ezekilov](#), they should do so for their own good. He explains that the misuse of the freedoms that social media platforms are meant to

enable has become the greatest threat to their integrity and legitimacy, adding that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become associated with online harassment and bullying, propaganda, and a blatant lack of accountability.

Although some social media companies have introduced measures to counter abuse and violence against women on their forums, it is clear that more needs to be done. Citing findings of the [Tweets that Chill](#) study, [Silvia López Prieto](#) reports a significant gap between self-reported acts of violence against women and those observed by Twitter. By way of illustration, while Twitter perceived 3.6% of women experiencing online violence in Kenya, 22.7% of women self-reported it to the study. In Colombia, the disparity was even more significant, with 8.3% observed by Twitter but 50.2% of self-report. Revising their systems and algorithms, while addressing the bias of coders and product managers, to end OVAWP is a powerful way for social media companies to regain legitimacy and restore faith in the platforms they created, argues [Jossif Ezekilov](#).

There are many steps social media companies can take. [Lucina Di Meco](#) urges them to: promote diversity among their users; use technological innovation such as artificial intelligence to curb bias and harassment; revise internal policies on fake news, user accountability, and fact checking; and invest in programs that support women activists and human rights defenders. [Abir Chebaro](#) and [Liri Kopaçi-Di Michele](#) call social media companies to raise awareness on online violence and harassment against women and its implications, implement strict codes of conduct and guidelines for users, and take swift and strong measures in response to reports and complaints, such as blocking and removal of content and abusers' accounts. [Jossif Ezekilov](#) adds that lobbying for norms of a free and open internet and revising systemic biases in algorithms and codes are needed to ensure online spaces are equitable and inclusive. To help curb these biases, he argues that social media companies should also promote diversity and inclusion within their own procedures and governance structures. Specifically to OVAWP, to counter the variations and ever-changing nature of language and characteristics belonging to each context, he urges social media companies to create networks of international and local partners and human-centered approaches to spot incidents and trends in different contexts.

4. Online violence against women in politics makes political careers unattractive. What message would you give to women who are considering leaving politics or discouraged from engaging in public life because of this?

The key word here is persistence. All participants urge women to persist, persist, and then persist some more. Too many women decide to leave politics because of the violence and harassment they fear and face on the job, both offline and online. This is one of the most dangerous impacts of VAWP. [Lucina Di Meco](#), author of [#ShePersisted: Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World](#), argues that women's unequal representation in politics and technology is one of the fundamental reasons why VAWP hasn't been addressed swiftly and strongly enough. [Abir Chebaro](#) adds that women in politics, particularly legislators and policymakers, have the power and responsibility to challenge abusive behavior, pass and enforce the implementation of laws preventing and protecting from all forms of VAWP. She also argues that networks of women in politics are essential to build resilience and provide support and empowerment in the face of challenges such as VAWP. In addition, [Silvia López Prieto](#) encourages women who face online violence and harassment to always report incidents and expose perpetrators, including from colleagues.

Summarizing the participants' message to women who are discouraged from engaging in public life, [Jossif Ezekilov](#) notes that it is not VAWP that will stop women in politics, but rather women in politics that will stop VAWP. In the meantime, it is essential to provide women in politics all the tools they need to engage in political life safely. In this context, he shares the example of NDI's [think10](#) initiative, a new safety planning tool providing women in politics guidance on how to enhance their personal security. [Jossif Ezekilov](#) also commends the present [e-Discussion](#) along with the Twitter Chat [iKNOW Politics](#) organized in parallel to the e-Discussion as important initiatives for sharing good practices and learning opportunities on the issue of OVAWP.

OVAWP is a global problem that requires global action. [Jossif Ezekilov](#) shares that even Tim Berners Lee, the inventor of the Internet, recently [highlighted](#) online harassment of women as a prime threat in his global action plan to save the web from political manipulation. Increased global attention and outrage, combined with innovative and coordinated solutions from States, legislators, social media companies, and civil society, can lead to the end of OVAWP. This will promote much-needed enhanced democratic integrity on a global scale.