

## Summary of E-discussion on Online Harassment of Women in Politics: How Online Harassment isn't 'Virtual' For Women

iKNOW Politics hosted a discussion on the online harassment of women in politics from June 6<sup>th</sup> to July 11<sup>th</sup> 2014. The discussion received feedback from several different countries including Egypt, Greece, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, the UK and the USA.

### **Launch message:**

The social media experience that comes across as a liberating tool for women is often equated with a safe space where one could confidently voice opinions in the public sphere. However, recently, a series of incidents have sounded a note of caution against the euphoria around social media. It has been compared to a street where women are abused, threatened, and rebuked - only virtually.

Modern technology, including emails, blogs and social media platforms, have supplied new avenues for circulating abusive content regarding women in general, and more specifically to women active in politics, such as bloggers, activists or politicians. Female Twitter users find themselves not only abused through words but also through morphed photographs with captions circulated online by other users.

The use of hate speech, threats and bullying to intimidate people into silence or away from certain topics is a far greater threat to free speech than any legal sanction. *“Imagine this is not the internet but a public square. One woman stands on a soapbox and expresses an idea. She is instantly surrounded by an army of 5,000 angry people yelling the worst kind of abuse at her in an attempt to shut her up. Yes, there's a free speech issue there. But not the one you think.”* Ally Fogg

Abuse over political tweets isn't a new phenomenon, it has, however, significantly gone up. There are currently too many examples of women being harassed and bullied through the Internet, especially women involved in politics and these are just a few:

- A young Fijian woman who intends to stand in the Fiji elections says she has received threats, including threats of rape, on social media;
- Laurie Penny, a UK political journalist, received direct threats to her and her family for criticizing neo-liberal economic policymaking;
- Italian Parliamentarian, Laura Boldrini, and other female politicians have been harassed with graphic sexual taunts and Internet threats of torture and murder;

- Criado-Perez, of Rutland, UK received abuse after her campaign for a woman to appear on a bank note resulted in Jane Austen being selected for the £10 note;
- Kavita Krishnan, Indian feminist activist and political commentator, recently opposed the induction of a controversial chief of a right-wing outfit, who led an attack on women in a pub, and drew a barrage of online abuse. Responses were replete with sexist comments and death threats. Additionally, there were many others who endorsed rape threats directed at her;
- Indian female politicians active on Twitter have been subjected to scornful tweets, often threatening their family members.

In this discussion, we would like to hear from you whether you have ever faced online harassment and share good practices or laws which were effective in curbing online harassments.

Q1. Do you have an example or a story to share of online harassment of women leaders, activists, bloggers or feminists?

Q2. What do you think would be the best measures to stop or control virtual harassment against women in politics?

Q3. Do you know of existing awareness campaigns that can be shared on stopping virtual harassment against women in politics?

Q4. Are there any laws in your country to prevent and punish (sexual) or virtual harassment of women?

The following is a brief overview of user comments on this topic. To see the original comments please refer to this [link](#).

## **Egypt**

A recently (May 2014) passed law in Egypt addresses online harassment for the first time. It defines a harasser as someone who “accosts others in a public or private place through following or stalking them, using gestures or words or through modern means of communication or in any other means through actions that carry sexual or pornographic hints”.

According to this law, perpetrators will receive a prison sentence, a fine or both. An offender could serve between one and ten years in prison, and a fine ranging from around \$1,500 to \$3,000.

The law also stipulates three-to-five years in prison for those harassing females at their workplaces or schools.

## **Greece**

While virtual and indirect harassment of women may not be very obvious or easy-to-understand, it is a prominent enough phenomenon to deter women from the political sphere and lead to the inadequate representation of women in politics. It is particularly directed at the 'weaker' women, who nevertheless have strong humanitarian and social opinions. But this political attitude leads to more weak people, more poor people and more wealth for the wealthy.

This type of bullying is a social problem and it is addressed strongly against women who are not very powerful. It is incited by men as well by an elite group of "strong" women; It has the ability even to kill, powerful as it is, though unjust. It is important to give the word to weak women and not only to the explicitly strong ones.

## **Lebanon**

The evolution of media and the progress of communication have made it easier than ever for young people to share their private information, pictures and other. More people are encountering the risk of being bullied when they share their private pictures, their statuses and their life.

"Bullying occurs when a person or a group repeatedly and intentionally use or abuse their power to intimidate, hurt, oppress or damage someone else". Bullying can be physical, verbal, social, or virtual.

On Social Media what we witness is a replication of the bullying done in traditional media, such as TV shows. Prime time comedies such as Wajdi w majdi in Lebanon are what we can categorize as social bullying. "Repeated mimicking," "nasty pranks," and using homophobic or racist slurs damage the reputation of a whole community, such as the LGBT.

Usually teenagers, children and communities that are bullied are "ill-equipped" and do not know how to respond. Parents and teachers should clearly explain to their children and students the importance of the privacy settings of social networks, such as Facebook.

With the progress of the education system in Lebanon and the use of tablets and internet from primary school, teachers and responsible adults should create groups for children to put the norms of ethics to use as well as establish a written code of responsible use of the comment part of the social networks and platforms, such as Facebook and twitter.

Moreover, they need to talk to them and teach them to never post or say anything that they wouldn't want the whole world to know. One day the boss may check the profile of a person. As

Mark Zuckerberg's ex-girlfriend said in the movie of the social network: "the internet is written in Ink and not in Pencil." What you post, send or publish can never be deleted, and can easily go viral so be aware!

## Malaysia

Here are some examples of harassment of female politicians in Malaysia:

Elizabeth Wong is the Bukit Lanjan assembly woman and Selangor executive council member. She is a member of Parti Keadilan Rakyat. Wong entered the electoral arena as a candidate under the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR, People's Justice Party) during the 12th general election and on March 8, 2008 and was elected as the new Selangor State Assemblyman for Bukit Lanjan with the second largest majority won by PKR state assembly candidates in Selangor. Wong is a human rights activist and was involved in activist environmental campaigns. She resigned all posts after the circulation of private photographs. In Malaysia, not all voters are connected via social media, so printed copies were distributed as well.

*"Despite having tendered my resignation from all posts, the media and websites continue to intrude into my private life and privacy. I have been informed by several media that they will continue to publish even more lewd graphical, sensational stories of my private life. I have also been told there will be a fresh assault, with more photographs and videos released and circulated in order to completely degrade and bury me...I have informed my party leaders that I am determined to relinquish all my positions, as a Selangor State Exco Member as well as the State Assembly woman for Bukit Lanjan."<sup>1</sup>*

Since Dyana Sofya Mohd Daud, political secretary to Gelang Patah MP and DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang, candidacy was announced, she has become the victim of an online smear campaign in what analysts have described as an attempt to diminish her "Malay-ness". The smear campaign quickly moved from the Internet to the Malay heartland of the constituency. Fake photographs of the candidate scantily clad were disseminated around Malay villages. Several youths have also harassed her during walkabouts<sup>2</sup>.

Dato' Ambiga Sreenevasan is a prominent Malaysian lawyer and human rights advocate, and is one of the eight recipients of the US International Women of Courage Award in 2009. She formerly served as the President of the Malaysian Bar Council and is currently co-chairperson of Bersih, an NGO Coalition advocating for free and fair elections. (In March 2013 Bersih launched a project to "Reject political violence"). She currently serves on the executive committee of the Women's Aid Organisation and is involved in the Bar Council Special Committee on the Orang

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<sup>1</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/news-events/world-news/assassination-elizabeth-wong-malaysia>

<sup>2</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/news-events/world-news/teluk-intan-malays-denounce-bikini-smear-campaign-against-dyana>

Asli (indigenous persons) rights. She is a Director of the Securities Industry Dispute Resolution Centre. She has been involved in the drafting and presenting of several papers and memoranda on issues relating to the rule of law, the judiciary, the administration of justice, legal aid, religious conversion and other human rights issues.

In response to her work a vile call by a staunchly pro-UMNO blogger called 'Papagomo' (real name: Wan Muhammad Azri Wan Deris), incited people to rape Ambiga This is a sample of the harassment she's been subjected to: "Ambiga is not married," claimed the blogger in a Twitter posting about the 55-year old Ambiga. "Who wants Ambiga? The virgin, let me break it. Or else we gang bang together. Anyone has the appetite?"<sup>3</sup>

In 2013, amidst contest for the Kulai parliamentary seat, members of the public have been receiving pamphlets depicting a woman MP deserting her constituents to nurse her baby. They are all printed in Mandarin and the target of attack is obviously the DAP candidate, Teo Nie Ching, who gave birth to a girl last year. In one of the three pamphlets, the caption tells the viewer that the woman is telling her baby she would be back to suckle her after she had finished hoodwinking her constituents. Teo said the pamphlets were indicative of an unethical campaign tactic and an insult to women. "The pamphlets insinuate that women who have just become mothers are not fit to represent the people...While we are trying to increase the involvement of women in politics, these slanderous pamphlets are suggesting that women can only choose either family or constituents."<sup>4</sup>

## **Mexico**

Online harassment of women leaders, activists, bloggers or feminists does take place in Mexico. One such example would be that of a female human rights' defender in the capital of Oaxaca, Mexico, was harassed through emails and social networks after an investigation related to a human trafficking network. In order to combat this phenomenon there needs to be a network of organizations able to support the allegations and contain the pressure and threats generated, especially when there are political actors involved. Unfortunately, there are no existing awareness campaigns that can be shared on stopping virtual harassment against women in politics and while legislation to identify and punish harassment exists in Mexico, it does not address virtual harassment.

## **Pakistan**

In Pakistan virtual harassment has become a new found tool for both politicians and activists. Access to public information, life and pictures can be photo-shopped and misused. Human

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<sup>3</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/news-events/world-news/gang-rape-call-flyers-among-latest-cheap-attacks-ambiga-illiterate-illicit>

<sup>4</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/news-events/world-news/obscene-pamphlets-target-dap%E2%80%99s-woman-candidate-malaysia>

Rights activists, Marvi Sirmed, who speaks for minority rights, is being bullied for how she dresses in public – as a Human Rights activist who wears sari and adorns a forehead bindi is slandered for being pro-Indian just because of her dress<sup>5</sup>. World renowned Human Rights activist, Asthma Jehangir<sup>6</sup>, gets a volley of nasty comments for her stand against threats<sup>7</sup>. Recently a media house - GEO - became subject of public debate due to its overboard and no-evidence reporting with reference to attacks on its anchor person. The case was referred to the Media Regulatory Authority & its Council of complaints consisting of civil society members. Before the matter could come to council a bullying campaign started against its female members, that is, Fauzia Yazdani, Marvi Sirmed and female poet, Kishwar Naheed. Their personal pictures, tweets, photos were taken from LinkedIn and Facebook and cut/pasted to generate false reports in the Media i.e. ARY TV, Dunya & Express, besides slides circulating on Twitter & FB. Fauzia Yazdani describes the incident as “traumatic for us and our families...but what can one do”

Every access and space needs responsibility, regulation and an ethical code. In Pakistan, the media, especially electronic media, lacks editorial ethical responsibilities, hence bullying & slander has become an everyday norm.

Women in politics are treated more as objects and their skills are overlooked. They are minutely covered and even a mere slip of tongue will be shown repeatedly on electronic media to ridicule. Once on air, it's on YouTube and all and hence becomes a viral tool of harassment for them. There aren't any existing campaigns to this effect but surely it has to start with stronger and more independent media regulation authority as current - PEMRA - has no laws. Media Houses need to be bound by a code of ethics & editorial responsibilities as most have TV channels and Newspapers. Anchors have strong Twitter & FB followings, beside viewership, but they need linguistic sensitivity training. In all, the Ministry of Information needs to have a clear and strong role in this matter.

## **United Kingdom**

Internet bullying is an effective tool that works well with the social political and economic structures of our societies. Such bullying utilizes conservatism and women's status to generate the effect that it was purposely designed to generate.

With solid rules and regulation and criminalization of the act we can challenge that, otherwise, the social fabric of our societies, that produces a docile cognitive structure of women, will always be fed through technology that helps bring women down and limit the prospects for them to be in the public sphere. Collective action is needed in order to challenge internet bullying and harassment, not just laws and regulations. Women's solidarity again needs to be actively put to work and come up with more viable solutions to such acts that are, in fact, part of the social

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<sup>5</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/news-events/world-news/well-known-pakistani-journalist-marvi-sirmed-shot>

<sup>6</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/news-events/world-news/malala-there-was-asma-jahangir>

<sup>7</sup> <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/news-events/world-news/pakistan-death-threats-against-lawyer-asma-jahangir>

structure that sees women as less than men, docile and that creates all possible means to send them back to the household domain<sup>8</sup>.

## USA

Internet and other social media and ICTs have proven to be uniquely dangerous instruments in perpetrating election violence against women (VAWE) because of the relative importance of psychological violence in women's political experience. ICTs may be used directly as a tool of intimidation by threatening or inciting physical violence against women candidates, voters or representatives. However most VAWE is psychological and, unfortunately, a number of the specific qualities of social media make them peculiarly suited to inflicting psychological violence on women in public life, including facilitating attacks on morality and dignity, speed of information dissemination, the relative impunity/difficulty of regulating this type of attack and other factors.

The good news is that ICTs also offer exceptional solutions to preventing and reducing electoral violence against women, including through monitoring and documenting violence, via education and awareness-raising platforms and through empowerment and advocacy initiatives. One of our members recently published an article on this issue, entitled "[Gender-Specific Election Violence: The Role of Information and Communication Technologies](#)" that explains these ideas in length and provides examples of both the threats and opportunities of ICTs and VAWE.

We would like to sincerely thank all participants for contributing to this forum.