

# **From Harassment to Harm: Understanding and Combating Online Gender-Based Violence in New Zealand**

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**Absolutely Positively  
Wellington City Council**

Me Heke Ki Pōneke

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# I. Executive Summary

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# I. Executive Summary

Online abuse. Digital harassment. Online gender-based violence. Technology facilitated gender-based violence. An assortment of terms has been coined to describe acts of violence which are increasingly being perpetrated online, disproportionately against women. Physical and online violence are heavily intertwined; however, online gender-based violence is often overlooked and the effects diminished as infrequent, virtual, or not as impactful as physical violence. This report aims to unpack these assumptions specifically in the New Zealand context by exploring the prevalence of online violence, its impact, and what solutions are possible. Although anyone can experience online violence, this report focuses on one of the populations most at-risk: female politicians.

## Methodology

This research begins with an extensive literature review focused on online gender-based violence against politicians. To gain deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of women in public service, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 women in various public service roles and from across the ideological spectrum. All the interview themes and quotes have been anonymized to protect participants' privacy and allow them to speak as candidly as possible.

## How prevalent is online gender based violence against politicians and their staff and how does it manifest?

One New Zealand study analyzed the change over time in abuse experienced by MPs through a survey conducted in 2014 and 2022. The authors found extremely high levels of abuse targeted at politicians which has risen over time, particularly after COVID-19. The study found almost all forms of harassment had grown significantly since 2014, regardless of gender. Women were found to be at higher risk for almost every form of abuse except three: abuse on political grounds, religious grounds, and reputational damage. Some of the categories of abuse they are significantly more likely to experience compared to their male colleagues are gendered abuse, sexualized comments, threats to their family, and threats of sexual violence. Data at the local level is not available at the same level of granularity as the national, but several surveys from Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) demonstrate similar trends of rising violence are taking place at the local level.<sup>i</sup>

The interviews validated many of the findings from the literature review:

- All interviewees had experienced some form of online violence, and many shared **specific experiences** that had stuck with them.
- For many interviewees, there are a minority of users who are committing the online violence. These users are often called "**frequent fliers,**" and although they are a very small group in most communities, they can feel large with the volume of comments and attacks they perpetrate.
- Although interviewees acknowledge online violence can happen to anyone, many see clear **differences in how they are treated versus their male colleagues.** They reaffirmed findings from the literature review that they are more likely to be attacked for their personal attributes and appearance compared to their male colleagues.
- **Women of color** frequently discussed how they are trying to campaign and legislate in a system that is not built for them.

## What are the impacts of online gender-based violence?

Research highlights how online gender-based violence affects a victim's mental health, physical safety, and the chilling effects it can have on free speech and women's ability to participate in the public sphere. In a New Zealand context, over 70% of surveyed MPs reported fearing for their own staff and 80% reported that their staff or family are fearful for them. It has led to mental and emotional stress in 62% of respondents. There is a mental and emotional burden that comes with constantly having to worry about violence. Many have altered their behavior by changing their routine or reducing their outings, making them less accessible to the communities they represent.

The research on the effects of online violence against staff is extremely limited. However, a quote from a campaign staffer for a US politician is quite telling: "I would describe myself as the liver of this campaign. The toxins must get filtered through me. I'm not quite at cirrhosis but it's been a lot of toxins."<sup>iii</sup>

The interviews reaffirmed and provided additional nuance to the literature review:

- A few key themes emerged around **mental health**:
  - All the interviewees articulated a tough, sometimes stoic, mindset in response to the online violence they received.
  - At the same time, everyone acknowledged that being a politician and/or being in the public eye is extremely difficult. It takes a toll and requires a full health approach to tackle - physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.
  - Concern over their family was a deep-seated source of anxiety for all the interviewees with children.
  - A few interviewees expressed a desire and need for more vulnerability amongst politicians.
- Almost every single interviewee chose to **ignore and/or block all instances of online violence** they experienced. Practically speaking, calling out and pursuing legal action against those committing online violence is an enormous drain on resources and time. Responding can also catalyze even more online violence, and it did for two interviewees. However, one participant did successfully publicly call out a specific instance of online violence against her.
- The interviewees expressed a **deep disillusionment and cynicism with social media**. They were described as useless, not responsive, and not worth the time to report threats to. Safety features are constantly changing, user guides are outdated, and the rules and responses they did receive felt arbitrary and nonsensical at times.
- The **chilling effect** of online violence repeatedly showed up in interviews. Online violence deters people from running, and politicians make trade-offs between increasing their public profile to achieve their policy goals and the online violence they know inevitably comes with an increased profile. Many no longer use social media to engage with constituents although they recognize that the potential for meaningful interaction is enormous if the platforms were safer.
- Overwhelmingly, participants said **they would still run for office themselves**.
- Overwhelmingly, participants also **actively encouraged other people to run, but with many more caveats** than the yes that they would still run themselves.
- Several interviewees shared instances where **staff mental health is also affected** by either physical or online violence.
- **Personal, community, and institutional support was a major theme**. Participants leaned on their partners, family members, community members, party colleagues, staff, senior women, and counsellors to help them both push back on some of the online violence and process the emotional burden of it.



However, not everyone deals with online violence or experiences support in the same way. One interviewee rarely discusses the online violence she experiences with anyone. A few women also highlighted a major discrepancy in resources allocated to safety at the local versus central level of government.

- **Accessibility is a double-edged sword.** Participants want to remain accessible and accountable to their communities but have had to balance safety concerns.

### What are different approaches to addressing the issue of online violence?

This list is non-exhaustive and is a compilation of interventions from research and interventions that interviewees suggested in our conversations.

**Supporting Individuals:** How can we help individuals prevent, mitigate, and build resilience in the face of online violence?

- Provide candidates and politicians at all levels safety training, tools and security
- Provide free counselling for both elected officials and their staff
- Strengthen support networks
- Use AI tools to remove hate speech from social media accounts
- Create a fund for victims to sue for defamation
- Remove any requirements for candidates to publish their address

**Community Change:** How can we work to prevent acts of online violence within a community and educate community members to better respond to incidents?

- Invest in local communities to build social trust, combat isolation, and create greater awareness of the harmful effects of online violence
- Develop trainings and codes of conducts for media members on gendered and racialized online violence and hate speech
- Train all actors in the justice system (e.g., police, judges) on how to better handle cases of online violence
- Invest in further research on the issue of online gender-based violence

**Systemic Change:** How can we create a system that holds perpetrators and technology companies accountable for preventing and addressing the harm from online violence?

- Updating the Harmful Digital Communications Act
  - Reviewing the “intent to harm” requirement
  - Separating out and criminalizing certain offenses
  - Embedding restorative justice
  - Reconsidering whether the approved agency should be a contractor or new agency
- Pass new legislation to regulate social media and technology companies to:
  - Increase transparency
  - Add preventative measures
  - Requires faster responses times
  - Add new safety features
  - Create new enforcement mechanisms

## **II. Methodology**

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## II. Methodology

This research begins with an extensive literature review focused on online gender-based violence against politicians. This review aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of online gender-based violence, particularly in New Zealand, its various forms, its consequences, and different approaches to addressing the issue. I utilize a variety of sources including peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, papers from research institutions around the world, and government agency resources.

To gain deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of women in public service, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 women. The women interviewed include city councillors, mayors, MPs, a university student activist, and a communications staff member. They span the ideological spectrum and include politicians in the Labour, Green, and National parties as well as those unaffiliated with any political party. Participants also come with a diverse range of backgrounds including Māori, Pacific Islander, and immigrant voices. All the interview themes and quotes have been anonymized to protect participants' privacy and allow them to speak as candidly as possible.

I acknowledge there are deep gaps in this research methodology. The vast majority of my interviews were conducted with politicians who are still active in public service and politics. Only one interview was conducted with someone who has chosen not to stand again, thus biasing the results to those who have chosen to remain and underrepresenting those who have chosen to leave or chosen to never become involved in electoral politics in the first place. The interviews also underrepresent the voices of communications staff and candidates who were not elected to office. These are important areas for future research to understand the impact of online violence beyond active politicians.

This report also contains disturbing and offensive language. All identifying information has been removed, but part of this report aims to shine a light on the true nature of online violence women face. Language is not censored when it is sent to them. Therefore, I have not censored it in this report.

**III. How prevalent is  
online gender-based  
violence against  
politicians and their staff  
and how does it  
manifest?**

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## a. Overview of Online Gender-Based Violence

Online gender-based violence is defined as “any act of gender-based violence that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of information and communications technology, such as mobile phones and smartphones, the internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately.”<sup>iii</sup> It is a global problem in which a 2019 survey from *The Economist* found 38% of women have personal experiences with online violence and 65% of women report knowing other women who have been targeted online.<sup>iv</sup> Another study found 58% of girls have experienced online harassment, and a UNESCO report found 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence.<sup>v vi</sup> These numbers are likely an undercount of the current extent of the problem with the rapid increase of internet usage which occurred, and has endured, due to COVID lockdowns.

Online violence is differentiated from physical violence in several material ways:

- 1) Anonymity:** the abusive person may remain unknown to the victim;
- 2) Action at a distance:** abuse can be done without physical contact and from anywhere;
- 3) Automation:** abusive actions using technologies require less time and effort;
- 4) Accessibility:** the variety and affordability of many technologies make them readily accessible to perpetrators;
- 5) Impunity:** abusers and perpetrators have often escaped any form of punishment or accountability associated with the damaging consequences of their actions; and
- 6) Propagation and perpetuity:** texts and images multiply and exist for a long time or indefinitely.<sup>vii</sup>

### What are examples of behavior considered to be online gender-based violence?

Although listed separately here, they are often used in concert with each other and are not mutually exclusive:

- 1. Threats of sexual assault and physical violence**
- 2. Threats to harm family members,** including young children
- 3. Unwanted images or sexually explicit content** sent through digital channels
- 4. Misinformation and defamation:** Spreading rumors and slander to discredit or damage a woman’s character
- 5. Cyber harassment:** Repeated behavior using textual or graphical content, sent either through direct messages or public comments, to frighten and undermine self-esteem
- 6. Hate speech:** Sexist or hateful language designed to attack or humiliate which is often misogynistic, racist, or homophobic
- 7. Impersonation:** Creating a false online presence in someone else’s name and sharing deepfakes of photos or audio
- 8. Hacking and stalking:** Intercepting communications and data; targets women across social media accounts and through location tracking
- 9. Astroturfing:** A coordinated effort to concurrently share damaging content across platforms
- 10. Video and image-based abuse:** Sharing private images or videos with malicious intent
- 11. Doxing:** Posting personal real-world information such as addresses to perpetuate violence

Sixty-two percent of women say they experience a sense of helplessness after an incident of online violence, because there are no clear pathways to address the issue. Only 25% of women surveyed reported the behavior to the online platform(s) on which it occurred and 14% reported it to an offline protective agency. These statistics indicate either a lack of awareness on reporting, a lack of trust in these institutions, or both. Almost three quarters of women worry online abuse may escalate to offline abuse, and 54% personally knew the perpetrator of the online violence.<sup>viii</sup>

Another framework, developed by researchers in the UK, for understanding specifically online *gender-based* violence, identified several types of gendered abuse that are often targeted towards female politicians. They include:<sup>ix</sup>

**1. Overt online abuse:** Communication which is openly abusive and misogynistic

More lies  
from the  
vile bitch!

I am glad I no longer live in Devizes and  
have such a sanctimonious stuck up  
know all bitch as my MP

You are a spy!  
You are evil,  
satanic! Leave!

**2. Everyday sexism and othering:** Refer to the gender of women politicians in ways which undermine or 'other' them, but are not overtly abusive. May deploy gendered stereotypes against women which reinforce the idea that they are unsuited to or are unwelcome in public life

Gosh how  
sensitive  
you are?

Silly wee lassie playing at politics.  
You'll have to find a job in the real  
world after the next election

When someone obese  
votes to take food from  
poor childrens mouths

**3. Dismissing discrimination and victim blaming:** Openly disparaging any discussion of discrimination in politics and denying their experiences of inequality

Proof of this volumes of abuse please? Your alleging  
criminal offences and should report this all to the  
police. People in your position should know all this

Oh, it's what you signed up  
for. You know the old  
saying. Can't stand the heat

Particularly for everyday sexism and othering and dismissing discrimination and victim blaming, these types of comments are not overtly abusive but nevertheless undermine women and other underrepresented groups. Regardless of the intent of the sender, it discourages women's participation in politics. As the authors of the study point out, these messages "serve as constant reminders of the marginalized status of female representatives, and women of color in particular, which make them aware that even 'well meaning' people have internalized negative stereotypes about them."<sup>x</sup>

Although physical and online violence are heavily intertwined, the scale and unique challenges of online gender-based violence necessitates a new approach to dealing with the issue. (Tellingly, 50% of girls in one survey said, "they face more online harassment than street harassment.")<sup>xi</sup> Conventional methods of dealing with physical violence that rely heavily on the criminal justice system are not fully appropriate nor equipped to deal with the nuances of online violence. Candidates and politicians are particularly vulnerable to online gender-based violence as a result of their public profile. Those perpetrating the violence often aim to intimidate women from seeking positions of power.

## b. Violence Against Politicians in New Zealand

There have been several studies conducted on the issue of abuse and violence against politicians in New Zealand. One study analyzed the change over time in a survey conducted in 2014 and 2022. This survey population included all MPs, regardless of gender, and discussed both physical and online violence.

The authors found extremely high levels of abuse targeted at politicians which has risen over time, particularly after COVID-19. In the latest 2022 survey, some form of harassment was reported by 98% of MPs who responded, and 96% had been harassed over social media. The study found almost all forms of harassment had grown significantly since 2014 with many MPs pinpointing the government response to the pandemic as the catalyst for the increase. The figure below contains the full breakdown of types of harassment respondents experienced broken down by gender. <sup>xii</sup>

	Male (n=20)	Female (n = 32)	Total (n = 52)	Chi-squared test p-value
Racial abuse	25.0%	33.3%	30.2%	0.41 (NS)
Gendered abuse	25.0%	62.5%	48.1%	<0.01
Sexualised comments	10.0%	40.6%	28.8%	<0.05
COVID-related abuse	50.0%	62.5%	57.9%	0.37 (NS)
Sexual orientation abuse	5.0%	15.6%	11.5%	0.24 (NS)
Threats of physical violence	30.0%	46.9%	40.4%	0.23 (NS)
Threats of sexual violence	0%	21.9%	13.5%	<0.05
Threats to family	5.0%	28.1%	19.2%	<0.05
Threats to staff	5.0%	15.6%	11.5%	0.24 (NS)
Death threats	15.0%	34.4%	26.9%	0.13 (NS)
Abuse on political grounds	95%	81.3%	86.5%	0.16 (NS)
Abuse on religious grounds	20%	15.6%	17.3%	0.68 (NS)
Threats of reputational damage	50.0%	46.9%	48.1%	0.82 (NS)

Source: Every-Palmer Susanna, Hansby Oliver, Barry-Walsh Justin (Stalking, harassment, gendered abuse, and violence towards politicians in the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery era)

Although not statistically significant in every category, notably women are at higher risk for almost every form of abuse except the last three: abuse on political grounds, religious grounds, and reputational damage. Some of the categories of abuse they are significantly more likely to experience compared to their male colleagues are gendered abuse, sexualized comments, threats to their family, and threats of sexual violence. These categories of abuse highlight some of the starkest differences in the data that are worth calling out. No male MP has received a threat of sexual violence while just over one in five female MPs has. Only 10% of male MPs have received sexualized comments while 40% of female MPs have. The effects of violence clearly affect a female MP's community as well with over one in four female MPs receiving threats to their family while only one in twenty male MPs have received a threat to their family.

Even for categories where the difference between genders is not statistically significant, it's important to note some of the major differences. For example, women are twice as likely to receive a death threat. Receiving even one death threat is terrifying. Even a singular additional death threat to anyone in Parliament can have an enormous impact on a person's mental and emotional health and discourage further engagement with communities out of fear for personal safety. In the most extreme cases, it may even cause people to leave politics.

Another aspect of political violence is violence against staff members. There are very few studies focused on the prevalence and effects of abuse against politicians’ staff although some studies have included it. This survey included a question regarding whether or not the MP’s staff had received threats, and 5% of male respondents and 15.6% of female respondents responded yes.

Comparing the results of the 2022 survey with the 2014 results, it’s clear that MPs now face elevated levels of abuse. Being the victim of abuse through online and anonymous platforms such as social media, letters, faxes, or email are essentially a universal experience now for MPs. Inappropriate social media contact in particular has seen the largest jump in the percentage of MPs reporting the experience. Physical violence has also increased with 82% of MPs reporting unwanted approaches in person and 42% experiencing following behavior (see figure below).

	Number reporting experience/total responses in 2022	Percentage reporting experience in 2022	Percentage reporting experience in 2014	Difference between 2022 and 2014 p-value
Inappropriate social media contact	32/54	96%	60%	>0.01
Inappropriate letters, faxes or emails	30/52	96%	68%	>0.01
Inappropriate telephone calls	29/52	56%	45%	0.19 (NS)
Alarming behaviour at electorate office	31/50	62%	62%	0.76 (NS)
Unwanted approaches	42/51	82%	50%	>0.01
Distribution of malicious material	36/52	73%	48%	>0.01
Threats to harm	33/52	63%	48%	0.04
Loitering	23/52	44%	28%	0.05
Following behaviour	21/50	42%	22%	>0.01
Property interference	22/51	43%	31%	0.15 (NS)
Spurious legal action	10/51	20%	11%	0.14 (NS)
Physical attack (actual or attempted)	9/51	18%	15%	0.14 (NS)

Source: Every-Palmer Susanna, Hansby Oliver, Barry-Walsh Justin (Stalking, harassment, gendered abuse, and violence towards politicians in the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery era)

**Making It Personal: Jacinda Ardern**

A study from Hate & Extremism Insights Aotearoa (HEIA) at the University of Auckland found Jacinda Ardern **“faced online vitriol at a rate between 50 and 90 times higher than any other high-profile figure.”** The study compared posts from a range of social media sites including many unmoderated channels such as Gab and 4chan for 7 leading politicians and bureaucrats across political parties and genders.

Other public figures were each mentioned **“in between 200 and 400 posts** over the study period”, but Prime Minister Ardern was mentioned in over **18,000 posts**. In addition, of the posts classified as **“strongly negative, angry, sexually explicit or toxic, those mentioning the PM made up 93% of the total.”**

This is not to say that this abuse was a driver of her resignation, but it is also unmistakable she experienced and is still experiencing tremendous amounts of online violence even after her resignation.

Source: <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2023/01/24/data-shines-a-light-on-the-online-hatred-for-jacinda-ardern.html>



Data at the local level is not available at the same level of granularity as the national, but several surveys from Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) demonstrate similar trends of rising violence are taking place at the local level. In 2024, 53% of polled elected members of LGNZ said “the level of abuse they were facing was greater than a year ago.” Sixty-five percent said they had faced abuse online, 39% at community events, and 33% experienced abuse doing everyday activities, such as shopping or picking their children up from school.<sup>xiii</sup> LGNZ’s 2022 survey found half of elected local government members “have experienced racism or gender discrimination while in office” and 43% have experienced “other forms of harassment, prejudice, threatening or derogatory behaviour.” Not only was harassment widespread, but many local elected officials did not know what steps they could take to address the harassment. Close to a quarter of those surveyed “are not sure how to report harassment or discrimination” and less than a third said they felt connected with other elected members in their workplace.<sup>xiv</sup>

### c. Studies from Other Countries

Although the US and New Zealand political contexts have key differences, many of the trends regarding violence against political figures are similar in the two countries. One study focused on a racially and ideologically diverse group of ten Congress members over the course of two weeks in the summer of 2020. The researchers analyzed all the direct replies to the Congress member’s tweets and all mentions from public pages and groups on Facebook for abuse. The researchers found women were “far more likely than men to be abused on Twitter, with abusive messages making up more than 15% of the messages directed at every female candidate analysed, compared with around 5-10% for male candidates.”<sup>xv</sup> Women of color were most likely to experience online violence. Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar (Somali-American) received the “highest proportion of abusive messages [on Twitter] of all candidates reviewed, at 39%.” Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (Puerto-Rican-American) received the highest proportion of abusive comments on Facebook. The study reaffirms the results of the survey of New Zealand MPs and found that both on Twitter and Facebook, “abuse targeting women was more likely to be related to their gender than that directed at men, with abuse attacking female candidates based on their physical appearance and perceived lack of competence. Conversely, abuse targeting men was more generalised, often attacking their political stances.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Analysing over four million tweets, a study of political abuse during the 2019 United Kingdom election found an increase in Twitter abuse from the 2017 to 2019 election cycle which grew month over month leading up to the election.<sup>xvii</sup> To better understand who receives online abuse and why, they created a four-factor framework involving:

1. **Prominence:** Abuse was concentrated on a small number of high-profile politicians who received the most volume and percentage of the abuse. This effect can be seen in the previous case study on Jacinda Ardern.
2. **Events:** Abuse was often triggered by an event such as a debate or public appearance.
3. **Online engagement:** An opinionated tweet often became a focal point for any negative feelings towards that person.
4. **Personal characteristics:** On average, men received more general and political abuse while women received more sexist abuse. Conservative candidates received more political and general abuse.

One of the most significant findings of the study is that individuals who chose not to stand for re-election had received more abuse across the preceding year. The research team



analyzed the percentage of Twitter replies considered abusive on a month-by-month basis and found that MPs who stood down had, on average, a statistically significant more abuse than the ones that stood again. Although not all MPs may cite online abuse as part of their reasoning for standing down, this demonstrates their vulnerability to online harassment and the potential impact it can have on their decision to continue in public service. This finding underscores the pervasive influence of online abuse on political participation and the broader implications for democratic representation, as it may deter qualified individuals from remaining in or pursuing public office.

### d. AI and the Future of Online Gender-Based Violence

Technology is changing quickly, and there is no doubt that this report will be outdated soon as new forms of online gender-based violence emerge. AI, only in its initial years of mass adoption, has already been weaponized against female public figures. Deepfakes, which can be used to describe any image or video that is AI generated, are primarily used to create non-consensual pornography. One study found that 96% of deepfakes are pornographic, nonconsensual videos of women.<sup>xviii</sup> Annalena Baerbock was running to be Germany's next chancellor in 2021 when she made blocking a gas pipeline project between Russia and Europe part of her platform. Fake nude images of her standing next to George Soros were spread across Twitter, thought by many to be a Russian misinformation campaign.<sup>xix</sup> Taylor Swift is likely the most prominent figure who has been targeted by AI-powered online gender-based violence. Sexually explicit deepfake photos of the international pop star were seen 45 million times before eventually being removed by major social media companies, although it's difficult to ever fully remove something from

#### Making It Personal: Sabrina Javellana

Sabrina Javellana, a young progressive elected to the city commission of a small town in Florida, had pornographic deep fakes of her posted on 4chan. Javellana and state Senator Lauren Book, another victim of pornographic deep fake images, worked together to criminalize non-consensual deepfakes in Florida.

Senator Book shared her experience of being blackmailed for \$5,000 and oral sex or have her deepfake images leaked. The two women successfully shepherded the bill to passage but not without a cost. Javellana's **mental health suffered**, she **withdrew from her friends**, and she **decided not to undergo the certification process to become a teacher** after the initial deepfakes. In the process of testifying and advocating for the bill, public attacks against her intensified with **more deepfakes images created and her personal phone number and address were shared online**. Her **family's phone numbers were ultimately leaked as well**.

The consequences are ongoing and long-lasting. Javellana decided not to run for office again despite her popularity, and she suffers from chronic anxiety. She still finds new deepfakes pornographic images of her online years after the first one and helping to pass the new law.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/31/magazine/sabrina-javellana-florida-politics-ai-porn.html>

- Disinformation
- Impersonation
- Cyber-harassment
- Video & image based abuse
- Unwanted images or sexually explicit content
- Doxing
- Threats to family

the internet.<sup>xx</sup> Consider the fact that creating deepfake videos or audio is highly accessible and detection methods have not yet caught up with creation, and it is clear that this is a deeply dangerous tool that will continue to be weaponized against women and girls without further regulation.

In the overview section of this report, I listed ten of the most common forms of online violence. In Sabrina Javellana's story above, AI and deepfakes have exacerbated and made more accessible several of those common forms of violence. Again, there is no doubt that new forms of online gender-based violence will emerge as we work to counteract the existing forms. Malign creativity is a term created by researchers to refer to the "use of coded language; iterative, context-based visual and textual memes; and other tactics to avoid detection on social media platforms."<sup>xxi</sup> The Wilson Center called it "the greatest obstacle to detecting and enforcing against online gendered abuse and disinformation" since it uses "coded language, less likely to trigger automated detection and which often requires moderate-to-deep situational knowledge to understand."<sup>xxii</sup> For example, nicknames such as "Stretchin Gretchen" or "Heels Up Kamala" are often used to imply misogynistic views without explicitly saying them. In short, those who perpetuate online gender-based violence are constantly adapting their tactics to evade detection. This should not deter us from continuing to address the issue, but it is critical to consider when designing effective solutions.

## e. Interview Findings

The interviews validated many of the findings from the literature review. With many of the studies discussed above able to access a wider and broader array of participants and data sources, this section will detail specifically what online gender-based violence looks like by sharing examples of the abuse and harassment interviewees have received. A few themes emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews:

- All interviewees had experienced some form of online violence, and many shared **specific experiences** that had stuck with them. I categorize these by the types of behavior defined in the overview, and many of the examples contain both overt violence and abuse and everyday sexism.
- For many interviewees, there are a minority of users who are committing the online violence. These users are often called "**frequent fliers,**" and although they are a very small group in most communities, they can feel large with the volume of comments and attacks they perpetrate.
- Although interviewees acknowledge online violence can happen to anyone, many see clear **differences in how they are treated versus their male colleagues.** They reaffirmed findings from the literature review that they are more likely to be attacked for their personal attributes and appearance compared to their male colleagues.
- **Women of color** frequently discussed how they are trying to campaign and legislate in a system that is not built for them. They were the most likely to bring up instances of othering, dismissing discrimination, and victim blaming.

## What Online Violence Looks Like

Almost every single type of online violence was mentioned at least once by at least one interviewee. The most commonly mentioned forms of online violence include threats of sexual assault and physical violence, threats to harm family members, misinformation and defamation, hate speech, and doxing. Staff were also personally subjected to extreme threats, including death threats and threats of sexual violence. Many interviewees also discussed experiencing physical violence or intimidation in addition to the online violence. Below are a few of the anonymized examples shared by interviewees categorized by the types of online violence laid out in the overview:

### 1. Threats of sexual assault and physical violence

- “One man called me once and finished the call by saying, ‘Do I need to come around and shove a softball bat down your throat?’... The specificity of the threat is scary. I’m not sure if he even has a baseball bat, but it’s the specificity that is scary.”
- “I got death threats from the [local gangs] because I put in paid parking. They would send me personal messages.”
- “I was working on legislation for a contentious issue, and I would get threats like, ‘We will rape you and rape your daughters.’ That was the graphic nature I would receive just when I worked behind the scenes.”
- “Once I was in a position to make decisions, they really started to go after me and lie about me. Then I saw people comment things like ‘This woman isn’t even born here and now she’s in a position of power we need to take her out.’”
- “After another MP posted this photo, I got rape threats and death threats. Things like ‘If I saw you, I’d run you over with my car,’ and ‘You think this is masculine, if I saw you I’d bend you over...’”

### 2. Threats to harm family members

- “There was quite a contentious issue a few years ago that led to my child being directly harassed online. It was just awful. That was really difficult, because it was my decisions that had an impact on her.”
- “On Twitter, some assertions were made by some people against my child. I reported it to Twitter, and it took a long time to take it down actually. If there’s something as defamatory as that floating around about someone, it needs to be taken down faster.”

### 3. Misinformation and defamation

- “At first it was low level trolling but when I blocked them, they started going all out all over Facebook. They started messaging people. The contacted [a senior official] and said that I wanted [their position], and she’s going to roll you. I had a good relationship with the person so they knew that it was not true, but once the reputational damage was starting, and I had spent a lot of time building relationships, I wasn’t sure how far it would go.”

- “It's not just my page. My page is pretty good now. People seem to engage with the issues and if someone starts to get personal, I call them out or block them. The worst kinds of harassment tend to happen on other people's pages. At that point you don't have any control over what happens. Unless you get a few people reporting they won't do anything about it. A lot of times people go on my colleagues' pages and some Facebook personality pages...I can't do anything about those comments. People will lie about me and my female colleagues.”
- “It's a whole spectrum. I've had defamation of my past life and my previous work and who I am as a person, and I've also had derogatory stuff said. Stuff that people think is positive but not that enjoyable... They comment on your physical appearance. They'll say things that are irrelevant or that they feel entitled to comment on...Even people commenting on your fertility and your plans to have children. What does that have to do with the job?”
- “People were saying gross stuff and all these rumors including sexual rumors...RNZ was going to report on this rumor with no evidence. Absolutely no evidence at all...the rumor kept changing and escalating too.”

**4. Cyber harassment:** Repeated behavior using textual or graphical content, sent either through direct messages or public comments, to frighten and undermine self-esteem

- “We've had one case where someone emails us at ridiculous hours of the day. It's usually racial, body harassment, saying things like you're a 'fat pig.' We had to talk to the police about trying to ban him and issue a trespass order.”

**5. Hate speech:** Sexist or hateful language designed to attack or humiliate which is often misogynistic, racist, or homophobic

- “I get a lot of messages being called a cunt. People just like to let rip and don't think about the impact of the language.”
- “It's usually racial or body harassment, saying things like you're a 'fat pig.’”
- “There's been a lot of nasty comments, because they pick on things like weight and what you look like and what you've worn.”
- “Fat scary bitch was what was graffitied at my electoral office. Also woke labour bitch.”
- “Also, funnily enough, your social engineering program beats people who object down so you citing these people that like your bs is comical and really betrays the foundations of your position... I'd actually love this if not for the fact that I'm made to feel so ill by your very existence being so infected by such an ugly weed in your mind.”
- “Migration status is another big theme. My ethnicity. Being a woman of color it's a confluence of all three. Whether you're a migrant or not you're assumed to be one.”
- “I had a lot of hate, especially sexualization which was very difficult as a sixteen-year-old. Also I got a lot of 'you're a stupid young girl.’”

- “They focus on my physical attributes. They'll call you a fat lazy bitch...You're a white bitch and you hate Māori people. Some of them will say things like, "Dig a hole and bury yourself I don't want to see your fucking face again.”
- “They'll say I'm useless, incompetent, body shame me. On Twitter a number of people try to assert I'm transgender and make general comments about my physical appearance.”
- “There was stuff about my looks. I'm a diversity hire. I'm stupid because I'm Māori.”
- “I was walking down the street. This 60 year old person turned around and said 'Fuck you mayor. You're a dreamer and you're going to kill this city.' Right in front of his young daughter.”

OMG get educated and grow up how about spending money on what is actually needed and stop worrying about unnecessary BS. Maori aren't the indigenous people of NZ and we have a right to choose. If we want to practice OUR OWN culture then that is what we have the right to do! Talk about discriminatory 🤔

You dirty fucken bitcg no wonder police and took my vehicles away now i owe nzta \$300

You dirty fucken slut why have you sent staff and police to harass me , is it you or that fucken egghead cunt your boss , fuck both of you.

**6. Impersonation:** Creating a false online presence in someone else's name and sharing deepfakes of photos or audio

- “I have people impersonating me on Instagram, and when I report it to them, they say they're not impersonating you as a public figure just you as a person and therefore they can't do anything about it.”

**7. Doxing:** Posting personal real-world information such as addresses to perpetuate violence

- “I had an instance where someone kept posting my address and aerial snapshots of my home.”
- “Once someone shared a picture of the apartment I lived in with the address on a Facebook group. It was on a thread where they were talking about how terrible the government was. I had just had a new baby as well. People were just ranting about how insane and terrible I was.”

**8. Physical violence or intimidation**

- “I have had things happen to my home. My property. I've had letters...To my surprise so far, it's been quite face to face stuff. We've had to make quite a lot of reports to the police of people coming into my home. People breaking in. People sending threats. None of that happened online.”
- “They'll say things like you're getting paid too much and not doing anything. When rates invoices go out people will get really nasty. I get lots of texts and people will yell at me on the street.”

“One time I was surrounded by a group of people in the street. I said I'm sorry 'I need to get to a funeral,' and that didn't help. I felt very unsafe in my community.”

“I went into this shop, and the owner started yelling at me. I'm the only person in here and she's saying all these things. I didn't try to debate her at all...She said I was a bully, I'm disgusting. I thought if I just stayed calm, she'll see I'm a normal person. But she said things like I don't mind if you and your kids die. I care about my business. She said the only reason I won the seat was because we stole ballots from people's mailboxes.”

## Frequent Fliers

There are often a minority of users who are committing the online violence. These users were referred to by interviewees as “frequent fliers,” and although they are a very small group in most communities, they can feel large with the volume of comments and attacks they perpetrate. Many interviewees have tried to engage with these frequent fliers, but their efforts are usually not met in good faith and in fact lead to continued abuse.

One communications staff member analyzed their monthly Facebook engagement data to understand exactly what impact frequent fliers have. Out of almost 2,800 comments, 575 comments, or just over 20%, came from the top fifty commenters. This averages out to over 11 comments per month per frequent flier while the remaining commenters averaged about 1 comment per month. Although this data doesn't analyze the tenor or tone of comments, there is a clear discrepancy in the amount of engagement between frequent fliers and the average Facebook user.

“The outliers have really ramped up and are making it more personal...You can really see the repeat offenders in a small community...Any topic that might come up, they're not interested in the thread of the topic. They're using it to persecute me or my council in a personal manner. It's not related to the issue or intellectual debate and policy.”

“It's really small numbers who are highly active, and it hasn't affected the community as a whole. They are relentless though.”

“Logic is never met with logic. It takes a lot of time to respond thoughtfully and answer their questions.”

## Differences in the Experience of Elected Women vs. Men

Interviewees shared ways in which their experience in elected office is different and can be more difficult than their male colleagues. Insights from the literature review on the personal nature of attacks women face was validated over and over again. Women felt as if things completely unrelated to the job of a public servant, such as their appearance, family life, weight, and clothes, were frequently targeted for attack. People felt entitled both to this information about them and then to comment on it whereas they observed their male colleagues did not receive the same treatment.

Some participants highlighted other barriers as well such as the gender pay gap, lack of access to large donors, imposter syndrome, physical safety during campaigning, and the difficulties of operating in a system that repeatedly reminds you it was not built for you, particularly for Māori representatives.



- “Male councilors don't get the level of personal comment that even female councilors get. Male councilors get questions on issues. With female councilors, it's a lot more do your job, get it right. It's that they themselves are the problem. The way you do your job, not what the issue is.”
- “People commented on my appearance and when I wore the same outfit, but the male candidate wore the same thing every event.”
- “I saw what Golriz went through. You can see the difference in what people go through as male vs female MPs. I really admired Jacinda but seeing the difference of how people talked about her vs John Key was really shocking and still is. The fact that people would consistently call her horse face. You'd never see anyone call a male politician that. Language is so gendered even in mainstream. I thought it was the fringes and random people but when you see it it's mainstream trusted sources.”
- “[The former mayor] was out in the media as much as she is, but there was never commentary on his body, his fitness.”
- “People say you should have thick skin and if you can't handle it, you shouldn't be in the job. Then how come my male colleagues don't get the same abuse we get?... While it's difficult for an individual to say this is the crap I get, collecting it and sharing it is an awareness thing. These are the types of comments female politicians get. Is this what we're willing to put up with as a society? Men do get harassed, but it tends to be more issue based. What they class as trolling is just my normal everyday experience. Someone didn't like what he said, and he thinks it's harassment. Men aren't seeing what women get and they think women are just overreacting. We need actual real examples. Is this what you're getting men?”
- “I'm more conscious about where I publicly say I'm going to be. I have a lot of old men that turn up to my events. Men in late 60s, 70s, they're just enamored with a young woman. I get older men that really monopolize my time. They feel like they're entitled to talk to me longer and get my attention. A lot of it I take for granted now though. You might look at it and say it's not natural or not normal. You don't think about it in the moment. The door knocking aspect of the job. What women can do and what men can do is different. Some of the times of day and places you can go.”
- “There's a little bit of a fascination with women and women being in politics. It's quite personal. People expect more information or want to know more about their personal situation than over men. People are much more judgmental. About what they should or shouldn't do. Whether or not they can have children when they're in office. It feels like there's more judgement on how they manage themselves rather than the politics.”
- “There's classic imposter syndrome. That this is not a place for us. That sense that it was a man's place and that I had to feel like an outsider coming into it. I realized when I got there though that I was far more well equipped than my male colleagues in terms of my capabilities and liaising with the community.”



- “When it comes to political campaigns you need money. I worked a minimum wage job for years. I don't have the wealth and connections to large donors that male counterparts might have. The gender pay gap also factors into that.”
- “It's hard to change the culture. You get demeaned. You get yelled at. You get put down. You feel like you are less than by the opposition party they heckle you. They try to overpower you with their numbers.”

## Experiences of Women of Color

Women of color face even greater levels of online violence with attacks on their gender, race, and migration status frequently overlapping. Women of color felt their competency was consistently attacked, despite having extensive experience in public service and in their policy areas before running for office, and their mere presence in political office will be called into question. They often come into office without any prior representation from their ethnic group and without a template for how to navigate the political landscape. They may not have mentors or peers to help them navigate a completely new and foreign political culture. And if they falter in any way in this challenging environment, their lack of competency is blamed once again.

- “The unconscious bias as a woman and a brown woman, I have to jump higher. I have to show more of my competency and skills. It's come out in working groups. We have polling groups and focus groups. They want to see less of my life story and see more of my competency and skill.”
- “People put you in a box if you're a woman of color. Even when I was a candidate and pretty high up on the list. Most media outlets assume that you're there as a diversity pick and no one wants to interview you.”
- “What I get is nothing compared with women of colour.”
- “You get some backlash from your own communities. If you're a migrant, what's a migrant doing in Parliament? There's constantly been commentary like that. Also you're too [ethnicity] for the mainstream and not [ethnicity] enough for your own community.”
- “Parliament is toxic. It does not help our mental health and wellbeing. It's the pace and rhetoric. The bullshit that comes in day in and day out...It's that all the time that Māori are getting special treatment. We have this culture which is imposed on us which does not look like us or feel like us. It's a fundamental issue with the system.”
- “There's always the perception around brown women that they are some kind of tick the box exercise. Kamala is experiencing this at the moment. They're calling her the diversity candidate. When we do push for representation, I don't know how many times I've had to hear selection should be based on merit.”
- “It's a completely different world, and it's very foreign to me. It's like a shock to the system. It's an ice bath. I feel like my body has gone into a flight, freeze, or flight mode. I'm like wait what? We don't see that in our communities. It's the behavior and the kind of disrespect that I see quite openly... It's openly being disrespectful to Māori people... Some of the words that come out...”

## **IV. What are the impacts of online gender-based violence?**

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# a. Literature Review: Mental Health, Physical Safety, & Chilling Effects

Research highlights how online gender-based violence affects a victim’s mental health, physical safety, and the chilling effects it can have on free speech and women’s ability to participate in the public sphere. A survey conducted by Plan International, a nonprofit focused on providing services to girls and youth around the world, shows these effects begin early in life. Out of 14,000 girls who responded, 24% feel physically unsafe, 42% lost self-esteem or self-confidence, 42% feel mentally or emotionally stressed, and 18% reported problems at school because of online violence. Nineteen percent of girls who were harassed very frequently said they reduced their social media usage and 12% stopped using it altogether.<sup>xxiii</sup>

*“I often face harassment online or in public, and it makes me feel unsafe, because every time, whatever I’m doing on social media, people keep commenting...I just feel I cannot express myself freely.”*

*-Young Indonesian Woman (19)*

In a New Zealand context, violence also takes a mental and emotional toll on elected officials. Over 70% of surveyed MPs reported fearing for their own staff and 80% reported that their staff or family are fearful for them. It has led to mental and emotional stress in 62% of respondents, and about one in five MPs report that this harassment has changed their personal relationships or caused problems with friends or family. Often public attention focuses on physical harassment and its effects, but all types of violence, including online, can have far-reaching effects on politicians, their families, and the communities they represent.

Another significant consequence of the increased levels of violence is the mental and emotional burden of constantly having to worry about violence. The majority of MPs have taken steps to better secure their physical safety (64% have increased security at home and 51% have increased their security at work). Many have altered their behavior by changing their routine or reducing their outings. This is a natural response to threats of violence, and it highlights the chilling effect that harassment can have. It makes politicians, who are representatives of their community, less accessible to the communities they represent.

Response/consequences of harassment	2022 (%)	2014 (%)	p-value
Increase security at home	64%	23%	<0.01
Increase security at work	51%	34%	0.09 (NS)
Change telephone number	8%	5%	0.61 (NS)
Concern going out in public	40%	12%	<0.01
Concern being home alone	24%	11%	<0.01
Change routine	41%	10%	<0.01
Reduce outings	40%	12%	<0.01
Change in personal relationships	18%	9%	0.13 (NS)
Lost time from work	10%	4%	0.19 (NS)
Fearful for own safety	72%	20%	<0.01
Staff/family fearful	80%	28%	<0.01
Mental or emotional stress	62%	[Not asked]	-
Problems with friends or family	19%	[Not asked]	-
Damage to reputation	38%	[Not asked]	-
Problems at work	28%	[Not asked]	-

Source: Every-Palmer Susanna, Hansby Oliver, Barry-Walsh Justin (Stalking, harassment, gendered abuse, and violence towards politicians in the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery era)

## **Making It Personal: Golriz Ghahraman**

*"Go back to your own country if you don't like it and I hope they shoot you".*

*"She is a fucking waste of taxpayers money!"*

*"They should have told her to "shut the fuck up, don't cause trouble, and people won't wanna kill you stupid retard. Fuck off back to Lebanon bitch!"*

*"I would love to shove my big fat thick sausage down your exhaust."*

These are just a few examples of the abuse that former MP Golriz Ghahraman received on her Facebook page. Ghahraman, a refugee from Iran, experienced an exceptional amount of online violence which targeted her both for her identity as a woman and person of color. Her mental health deteriorated, and she was caught shoplifting after two and a half terms in Parliament. In a 2024 interview with John Campbell, she describes the act as "self-sabotage...to get out." She goes on to say, "I would describe what I was feeling in those months as extreme distress, helplessness, and anxiety which grew to a level that felt scary...Though I was more and more aware that something felt very wrong and that I was not coping well mentally, I felt ashamed of these feelings. My internal response was to feel angry at myself for 'being a failure' or 'weak', undeserving of the respect and trust I received from supporters." She has pleaded guilty for the charges of shoplifting and has left politics, but her experience in the public eye demonstrates some of the worst impacts of online violence.

Source: <https://www.1news.co.nz/2024/06/27/exclusive-john-campbell-asks-golriz-ghahraman-why-she-threw-it-all-away/>

A survey of local government officials in the United Kingdom attempted to understand how harassment affects a politician's decision to stand again for election. Of the 27% of surveyed councilors who said they would not stand for the next election, 68% said abuse and intimidation had influenced their position on whether to stand again.<sup>xxiv</sup> Sixty percent said, "they were aware of others being unwilling to stand or restand for election, or take on leadership roles, due to anticipated abuse."<sup>xxv</sup>

Again, lessons can be drawn from journalists. One in four have reported mental health consequences as a result of online violence and 12% gave specifically sought medical or psychological help. Seventeen percent felt physically unsafe and felt the violence would escalate into the offline world. Research on journalists also demonstrates several apparent ways this violence translates into suppression of speech. One in ten had asked to be "taken off air, or have their bylines removed," one in five avoid certain beats which they believe will lead to violence, and 15% said they "avoid particular sources or contacts because of their history of abuse."<sup>xxvi</sup> Nearly a third said that they "self-censor in online communities as a result of being targeted in online violence campaigns."<sup>xxvii</sup> Although some may view these outcomes as occupational hazards, these are significant consequences that result in the silencing of women's voices, perspectives, and their expertise.

The research on the effects of online violence against staff is extremely limited. However, a quote from a campaign staffer for a US politician is quite telling: "I would describe myself as the liver of this campaign. The toxins must get filtered through me. I'm not quite at cirrhosis but it's been a lot of toxins."<sup>xxviii</sup> Although not the focus of this paper, research on the effects on staffers of online violence is sorely needed.

## b. Interview Findings

### **Mental Health: “It’s water off a duck’s back.”**

A few key themes emerged around mental health in the interviews. All the interviewees articulated a tough, sometimes stoic, mindset in response to the online violence they received. They frequently used phrases such as “It’s water off a duck’s back,” “play on through,” “I don’t care,” “I don’t dwell,” and “I laugh it off.” This mentality often extended to how they chose to respond to the online violence they received which is discussed in more detail in the following section. This is where the self-selection bias in my research methodology may come into play. With most of the interviewees actively holding public office, it is likely impossible to be in these positions without this type of thick-skinned attitude. All of them reported varying levels of abuse, but several described its occurrence as daily. If they did care or dwell or didn’t play on through, it would affect their ability to do the job and/or even willingness to be in this position.

At the same time, everyone acknowledged that being a politician and/or being in the public eye is extremely difficult. A few discussed how criticism from their communities or constituents is quite emotionally heavy (vs. anonymous online users). It takes a toll, and everyone shared ways they took care of all aspects of their health – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Interviewees described this work as just as vital as their policy and advocacy work, because without it, they cannot effectively serve their communities.

Concern over their family was a deep-seated source of anxiety for all the interviewees with children. Several mentioned the abuse their children might or have faced as a major consideration in their current and future political plans. For some, this is the singular reason they delayed running for office or may not run again in the future. There is a sense that running for office is an individual’s choice, and as an individual, they are willing and capable of shouldering the scrutiny that comes with the office. However, their families and communities have not chosen this life. They want to protect their families, and interviewees feel a sense of guilt and responsibility if anything were to happen to them.

Lastly, a few interviewees expressed a desire and need for more vulnerability amongst politicians. Ultimately, all the interviewees see their role as one of public service. They are serving their communities, and that requires emotionally connecting to their communities and responding to their needs. Emotional connection requires a level of vulnerability that is not valued and often taken advantage of in politics. What would a world look like that did value vulnerability in politicians? How can we create an environment where vulnerability and strength are not seen as oppositional traits? How might the public benefit from having someone represent them with just as much empathy as strength?

### **“Water off a duck’s back.”**

“It could be my age and stage. I was taught to just play on through.”

“The campaign was 30 years extra off my life wrapped into a couple of months...at the time I was like what am I doing? Why am I going through this?...I’m so thankful for my campaign now even though it was traumatic because it’s molded me to be so strong in this coalition government.”

“It doesn’t affect me. I’ve been a single parent all my life I’m using to having to be strong.”

- “For me personally online harassment was one of those oooo if I can't handle comments, that's just what comes with the job, no matter your identity, you're going to get hate. I fully accept that...When I got my first hate comment though, I didn't care. I thought it would be so hard and affect my mental health, but it just did not affect my whatsoever. If it was someone from my constituency though...if it was my own that had done it, I think I'd be really cut up. These other people don't even have faces and names on their accounts. I don't care.”
- “I shrug it off, or I hide the comments or block them.”
- “I started going to the pool every second day. When I first started people would abuse me. They'd say things like, 'You put our rates up. You won't let us drive on the beach.' I'm just here as a regular person and working out. After a while though, everyone started saying, 'It's so nice that you come down here.' People need to realize you're normal.”
- “I don't dwell on it. I don't know who you are, and I don't care. However this year, in this specific issue area I work on, there was a huge issue that happened with funds being cut. I had hundreds of emails of how that has affected people's lives really personally. That was really hard.”
- “It's all intended to hurt and offend but it doesn't. I find it mundane and trivial.”
- “It might sound terrible, but I just take it as a given. Sometimes the well-meaning stuff where they think it's not bad, but they comment on personal stuff, for me I just consider it part of the job. I laugh it off and think it's irrelevant. No one else in any other job would have to hear comments like this though.”

### **This job is extremely hard - take care of yourself.**

- “It's the way they do it that can get quite hard on your heart and spirit if you let it. You need to keep yourself well and sleep enough.”
- “The concept of being a public figure and a view from some that they own you is quite shocking at first.”
- “The first year [of elected office] was the worst year of my life.”
- “It bothered me a lot when people said defamatory stuff. It's lies. There's nothing stopping them. Even if it gets taken down and it's been said and it's out there.”
- “I'd be lying if I said it doesn't affect me. It's part of my coping mechanism to just not look. If there's a lot of it happening, I'll read it all the time and it really is not healthy.”
- “You have to remind yourself that you can't save the world. It's not your responsibility. I want to stop stereotyping burnout. Consistently you'll see politicians, especially Māori and Māori women politicians, have a heavy load or burden. They look burnt out. Healthy habits are key. Younger women and younger girls are watching me. If you burn out, they think that they're going to war and need to be headstrong. That's not the lifestyle I want. Drink your water, go to sleep, work out. If you don't have those habits in place, you will burn out.”

“When I was in [specific role], and I actually had a little bit of power, about a year and a half in, I started to feel like I was being subject to more personal attacks from the opposition and that started to affect my feelings of safety and my mental health.”

### **Concerns around family**

“I still feel like I have a contribution to make for a while, but as my kids get older, it's a live question as to whether I want to put up with the emotional baggage and risk of it.”

“I thought about my teenage kids and what it would be like for them.”

“I'm fine with criticism of me and false allegations of me. That's water off a duck's back. I utilize my strategies, and it doesn't affect me. When it happens to your family members though, it made me feel unsafe.”

“Police have been involved on a number of occasions. When I was getting death threats, I was under a GPS monitoring system 24/7. The police knew where I was at all times. That was quite hard to deal with. I minimized how it actually felt to protect my family. I didn't want them to realize that I was worried about it, and I didn't want to stress them out.”

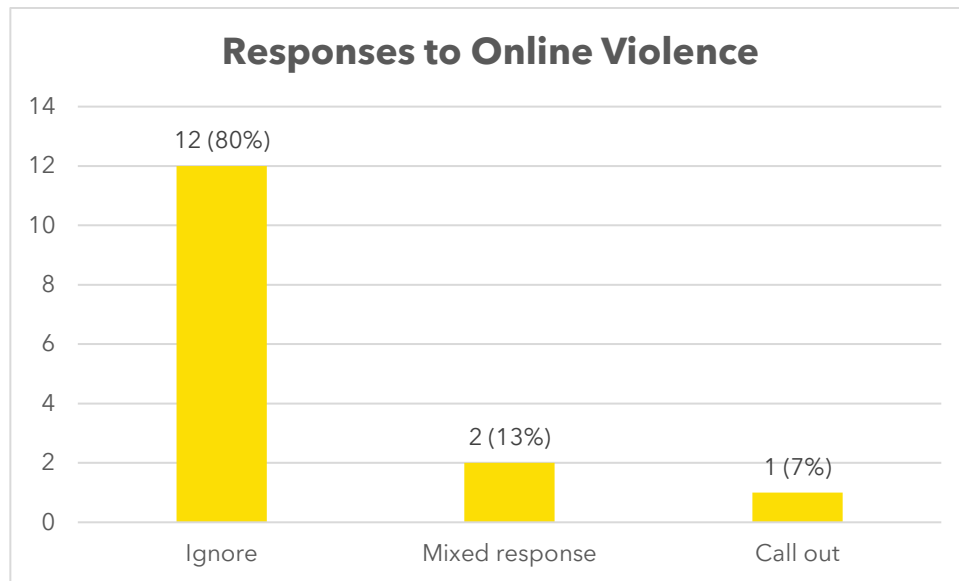
### **More vulnerability is needed.**

“I don't think we should have politicians who put their armor up and don't care and don't have empathy. We should care. We need to acknowledge it. We should have a strong spine and a soft front.”

“When I was putting myself forward in 2020, I was told I have to be very thick skinned and not worry so much about letting people down. I'd argue that the right kind of person representing you is a person who cares. A person who cares is going to be affected about what people say. But being empathetic and caring makes you susceptible to online abuse. It's a thin line and a hard balance.”



## Responding to Online Violence: To Ignore or Call out?



Almost every single interviewee chose to ignore and/or block all instances of online violence they received. Two women had tried to call out and push back on abusive comments and were immediately subjected to intense backlash. One woman successfully called out and pursued legal action against some of her trolls, but it required an enormous investment of her own time.

Practically speaking, calling out and pursuing legal action against those committing online violence is an enormous drain on a public official's time and resources which is already in limited supply. For many, responding gets in the way of doing the actual work that they need to do, and only four interviewees had staff that helped them manage their social media and email. The calculation is very simple for many interviewees: I either take time to respond and report this hate (which many do not believe will lead to any consequences anyway), or I can respond to a real constituent's needs or work on policies I care about. Two respondents felt that the time and effort to publicly respond and address online violence was worth it in the case of severe threats (e.g., death threats), and they fall under the mixed response category.

One participant highlighted how the calculus may be a bit more complicated, because there is a drain regardless of whether or not you're not directly responding. She remarked, "I think I'd be more effective in other positions where there would be less risk. This drains my energy. It takes so much time. I could've been 10 times more effective without the hate. If I go into a non-public facing role, I'll be able to dedicate so much more time to actually doing things." The time and energy required to withstand public scrutiny is still a burden, regardless of whether or not a person is directly responding to incidents of violence.

Responding to online violence certainly comes with risks. Highlighting it can catalyze even more online violence, and it did for two interviewees. However, one participant successfully publicly called out a specific instance of online violence against her and used the Harmful Digital Communications Act to pursue legal action. The process was far from perfect (further analysis is in Section V: Solutions), but she has seen a significant reduction in the amount of online violence against her since doing so. This interviewee brought to

light another part of the calculus: how do we stop normalizing online violence? If everyone ignores it and keeps silent about it, how will it ever get better?

The communications staff member I interviewed saw social media as a way to genuinely connect with constituents and educate them on positive changes in the community. She personally read and responded to every single comment on Facebook and Instagram, including across over fifty Facebook community groups. This level of dedication was incredible, and she herself received intense online violence as a result, including death threats. Still, she said, "I love my job, and I love where I work. I love standing up for them...We want to respond to even negative comments and show the facts and educate others that might read it. We see it as an opportunity."

- “I've received some pretty extreme hate online. Twitter is definitely the worst. Facebook. I don't really see it on Instagram. I don't indulge. Don't do it on my account, you can do it on other accounts.”
- “I post things, I don't comment, I don't often read the comments, I just don't engage. I find it's the safest. It's the most pragmatic way at this point that I've been able to do my job and do my best and just sort of not engage.”
- “There are probably things that I should have escalated. I don't like to engage.”
- “It inevitably became not worth the energy or effort of convincing the naysayers or to stick up to the bullies. It's just not worth it. I want to prioritize face to face engagement and genuine dialogue and listening. Online is not the forum for that.”
- “At the beginning I thought these people are so rude, but now I ignore them they're just venting.”
- “I had a councilor getting hounded by frequent fliers. He was spending hours responding to them. I told him these people will never listen to you. He came back and said you're right. Now he blocks everyone who posts those types of things.”
- “I don't check social media much. I'm not active on many platforms especially X. Even when I do post I tend to not read the comments. My personal Facebook page is fine. I block people if they come on and cause issues. On my MP page, I'm more accommodating for criticism, but swearing, racism, then I just block. I don't engage at all.”
- “Now it's so common I don't engage in social media. I have staff that do my posting. I used to engage a lot online and engage with people directly, but now it's just so toxic.”
- “I think I'd be more effective in other positions where there would be less risk. This drains my energy. It takes so much time. I could've been 10 times more effective without the hate. If I go into a non-public facing role, I'll be able to dedicate so much more time to actually doing things.”
- “I made a comment once that said this is enough. This is not the way that you get change. The media picked up on it and said how can you be so cruel - I don't engage with anything now.”

- “My first six months we issued 3 trespassing orders. I have a really high bar for the standard of behavior that comes through our door. If you aren't respectful and calm, my team is trained in de-escalation and will report you.”
- “I had done an online training session that was aimed at women's safety online. One of the techniques was setting boundaries. I put up a post recently saying I'm happy for discussion and debate but debate the issue. Don't attack people personally. That sent them off the deep end. What the hell are you doing being a politician? It unleashed levels of vitriol I hadn't seen.”
- “Women are disincentivized from saying anything. You don't want to encourage more people to do it. If you show people what's happening there will be copycats. But you also don't want your attackers to know they had an impact on you. That's one of the hardest parts is to go on public TV and say it hurt. I was losing sleep. I had to leave meetings to go and cry. But I think that was the best thing I did and being really clear and open about it. If you don't it gets normalized and ignoring it doesn't make it go away...My page is much more tame now. People know I'll take them on. I had someone who said nasty stuff recently, and I just took a screenshot and put it on my page and he hasn't said anything since...I get that it's really hard, but I think that if the public actually saw the content and not just heard about the issue, we'd get more attention.”
- “The [previous female office holder] ignored things and didn't read the comments. I don't think you can do that these days. You lose the narrative.”

### **Social Media's Response: "It's a war we've lost."**

The interviewees expressed a deep disillusionment and cynicism with social media. Over and over I heard that social media companies were useless, not responsive, and not worth the time to report threats to. The only person who had a positive experience was the individual who publicly held her trolls to account and received some media attention, but she fully acknowledged the only reason they were responsive to her was because the incident had gained a certain amount of public attention.

Not only do interviewees find social media companies to be unresponsive, they are also opaque and hard to navigate. Safety features are constantly changing, user guides are outdated, and the rules and responses they did receive felt arbitrary and nonsensical at times. This contributed to many participants' decision to utilize the platform less or ignore online violence, because they felt that there were no pathways to accountability.

- “I don't bother reporting to the social media companies. We find that to be a complete waste of time. We just block them.”
- “I complained to them for the death threats, but it went nowhere [referring to Facebook]. I never heard from them again...I would have liked to see them take it seriously. They could have banned that person, but they didn't. If a death threat is not serious enough to get banned, what is?”
- “I can't even get a blue tick on Instagram. They say that I don't meet the threshold to be verified...Social media companies need to take greater responsibility. Not to close free speech, but to classify it. They have a responsibility. All these trolls don't seem like real people. It seems like they can do a filter at some point. If I'm blocking

this person, an algorithm can see 15 other MPs have blocked them. You should remove them.”

“On Facebook or Instagram I'll always report them for their harassment and block them. I don't know what Facebook does from there though.”

“Facebook is always changing its safety features, and they never tell you how it's changed. The Help page is always out of date...Facebook is the worst. We have the most engagement on it, but they don't respond. They don't explain how things work.”

“I don't naturally think about contacting the social media companies. I think it's a war we've lost. My point of not bothering to raise it is because I don't have any confidence that anything can be done.”

“Social media works less well for me now too. I used to have speeches that go viral on Facebook, and I'd be on the bus or taxi and people would say, 'I saw your video in Parliament. Great job.' I felt like I was getting a lot of reach, and now I'm not really getting that reach anymore. TikTok has changed things, and it might be I haven't adapted...I can keep it ticking along, but it can't be a major plank to reach people in my constituency.”

“These companies are in a different country, and just here making money in New Zealand.”

“I also worry about AI and deepfakes. What can that do to people even if it's disproven? We haven't had to contend with that. We don't know where our image will be used and what manner and how we will be used.”

### **The Chilling Effect: “It only takes one.”**

The chilling effect of online violence repeatedly showed up in interviews in different forms. Online violence deters people from running, and politicians make trade-offs between increasing their public profile to achieve their policy goals and the online violence they know inevitably comes with an increased profile. Several consciously and pointedly try to stay under the radar with minimal media attention to reduce the amount of online violence they experience. Many no longer use social media to engage with constituents although they recognize that the potential for meaningful interaction is enormous if the platforms were safer. These are of course rational, and even necessary, responses to the political environment interviewees are forced to navigate. It also is a clear handicap in achieving policy goals and the change a politician and their constituents want to see. It's harder to persuade people the policy goals you want to achieve are the right ones. It's harder to get those goals to the top of a political agenda and to rally support for them. It prevents women from gaining the power they need to achieve real, tangible change.

Even one high-profile violent incident can have an enormous chilling effect on those who are thinking about running and are currently in office. Multiple participants brought up the murder of MP Jo Cox in the United Kingdom as a disturbing example of what they worry might happen to them. Others brought up Jacinda Ardern, Golriz Ghahraman, and James Shaw as other frightening examples of both physical and online violence. Although these incidents are rare, in the words of one of the participants, “It only takes one,” and therefore, even one incident can have an enormous impact on the willingness of women and young people to stand for public office. There are multiple well-known examples of

violence against politicians, but young women rarely, if ever, see any examples of a positive experience in public office.

### **People don't run.**

- “I know some people don't stand because of a fear they'll be harassed because they've seen it happen to others.”
- “It's really hard to convince them. They don't want to put themselves out there. They don't want the public harassment.”
- “I can't guarantee it'll be the same for everyone. It's hard to encourage other people to be quite as open...A mayor said this is why she wasn't standing again.”
- “I worry it's going to stifle representation. People will be so concerned about what may happen with social media and the increasing public nature of the role. It was public always but not as public as this. This will put people off. I worry about the next generation of politicians who have been online always, particularly for young people you can say or do things that may not be deemed appropriate when you decide to take up politics. What a 15-year-old says online, should that affect you when you're 28 and want to run for politics? People always say oh gosh if social media was around when I was young, I would never be a politician now.”
- “[This role] confirmed I do not want to go into politics at this age, and potentially ever, watching what's happening to older women...A lot of men I talk to are happy to jump in and do it one day. When I talk to women, their reasoning is I really want to go into politics, but I don't want to deal with the hate and I'd get so much of it. Some people have family members who think women shouldn't be in politics.”
- “I've worked with so many awesome young women, but I don't feel confident telling them to go into politics, because I don't want to tell them to go into a space that isn't safe.”
- “I run training for potential candidates, and we've definitely talked about it, and it's the thing that puts women off. They will comment and say I'm not going to do it because I don't want to expose myself to that level of abuse. That's my frustration, because I don't have an answer in how you can prevent it.”
- “One of the main real risks is that there is so much increased understanding and awareness of the hate and vitriol that politicians can get, I shudder to think of the effect that has from dissuading people to run. Even if there are cases such as myself where I haven't been subjected to very targeted attacks, that's not necessarily the perception. It's if you stick your head out, you will get it chopped off. It's about talking to people and being open. It is still possible, and it needs to be possible that good people are filling these roles. You don't have to have this ironclad shield and armor up. You can be a human being and be vulnerable to people saying mean things to you. It can be fun and meaningful and it's important. We need to be talking about that as much as we're talking about the very real issues and challenges and addressing the disgusting behavior.”
- “It's hard to tell if these are keyboard warriors or if people would take physical action. You don't know - it only takes one person.”

“One of the depressing things is that a lot of Māori women will see what I went through, and say, ‘Fuck that I’m never doing that.’ I want to rebuild that over time and show we have to keep going.”

### **Reducing your Profile**

“I make myself a small target, but not everyone has the ability to do that. I’m not searching for controversial stories. I’m not trying to hunt for personal profiles pieces on me.”

“If you’re more visible and perceived to be more controversial, it increases. I made a conscious decision to not be. I won’t court controversy. I try to stay out of the media eye. I don’t want the vitriol...It is a bit of a handicap. I’ve thought about it quite a bit over the years. There are some who court controversy who bring you visibility and people know who you are and that is helpful when you’re trying to get a message across. It is a trade-off. It’s one that I’ve made a conscious decision about. I’d rather not have the attention and people not know who I am. The upside is I don’t get all the shitty stuff at all.”

“You sort of feel like it’s fine just get over it, it’ll probably be okay. I don’t want to walk away. But there are times when I do want to be anonymous and not feel responsible for all of this. If I am in a position of power again, which I would like to have one day to make positive change, but if I do that, I’ll be more of a target, and I’ve got young kids. I think maybe we should stop trying to change the world, but then only terrible people will be in Parliament. It’ll only be people who want power instead of sensitive and genuine people who want to have good interactions with people.”

“When I was younger, I wanted to go into politics. Now I’ve decided I won’t do it until I’m at least 30. I don’t think I can endure that right now in a public role. I need to build the resilience and take care of myself. I probably wouldn’t go into another public facing role for at least 5 years. My partner used to say that I should be an MP, but now he says that I should never be an MP because he’s seen the toll it takes to be under so much public scrutiny.”

### **Losing a Way to Talk to Constituents**

“I miss out on connecting with and engaging with those who are really interested online, but I’ve just found it’s not worth it.”

“It affects our democracy. It affects our ability to represent. A channel that I used to use to hear the views and interact with my constituents is now gone.”

“What I’ve seen over time is that the positive commentators on social media falls away, because they don’t want to be reading and responding to the negative and get caught on the crossfire. It becomes a personal attack on them. They’re a bystander and there’s nothing worse than a bystander who is attempting to intervene being dragged in the mud.”

“I’m trying to stay off it to avoid the toxicity. But then you give up some of the ability to communicate with constituents.”

“A lot of female councilors don't engage on social media, because they don't want the backlash. The tools have enormous potential though, because I see it as a key way of engaging with the community and letting folks know what's happening.”

## Representation

“I think about how James Shaw was punched in the face. The fact that could happen to a white man, I think about how it could happen to me now.”

“I talked to this high-profile MP once, and I asked her how she deals with it all. She said there's no switch. It's always going to suck. You just have to be okay with that. When I was younger the politicians seemed like they had it all together. But I've now realized there's no way to not be affected, and it's changed my view.”

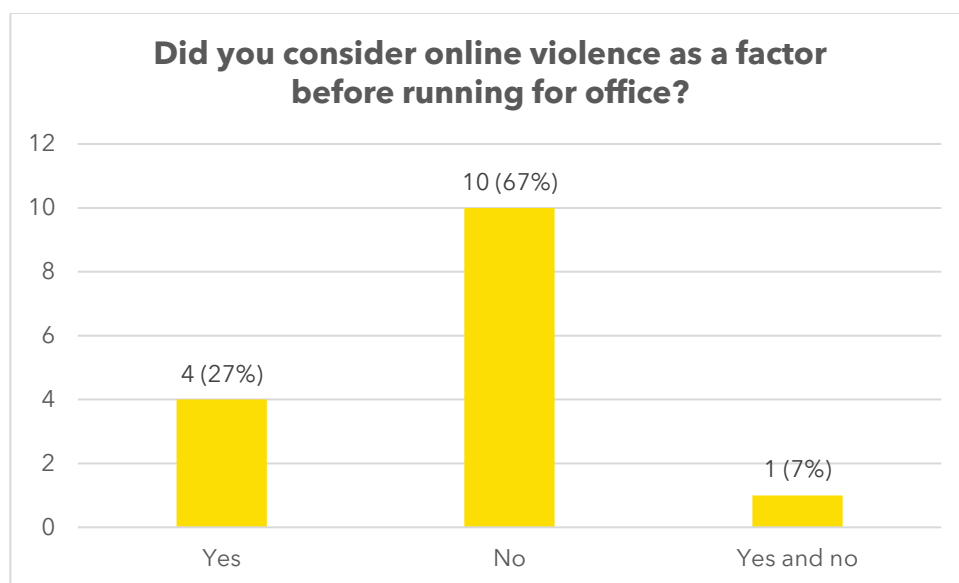
“A woman my age was murdered in the UK after Brexit, and she did a passionate pro-refugee speech defending migrants, and she got stabbed in the street. She had 2 young kids. You try to do good things for people, but there are people out there that could do unthinkable things.”

“No it hasn't affected my mental health, but it's not just about me. When you look around and your colleagues are dragged through the mud, it makes me feel very icky about the role I have and unsafe about the role that I have. I don't feel like I have experienced abuse to the extent others have, but their experience makes me feel unsafe. It makes me feel like it might happen to me, and it makes me question whether this is the right space to work in.”



### Did you consider online violence as a factor before running for office?

Out of the fifteen interviewees who are or have been in elected roles, although most acknowledged it was a problem they were aware of, the majority (67%) did not consider online violence as a factor before running. Many did not expect to be elected, and in general, those currently in office had the confidence to just try and run whatever the outcome. Some have been in public office for years, and social media and the current level of public scrutiny was not as much of a concern when they first ran for office. Out of the four who did consider it as a factor before running, one delayed running for office because of it, and one decided not to run at all. One decided that the risk was worth it, and one built up the right supports and processes for her to deal with the risks. One interviewee did not consider it when she ran for her first elected position, but it became a consequential factor when she considered running for a new more high-profile position. Even within this small sample size though, the chilling effect can be seen in getting women to even consider running for office.



“I had seen it in my previous roles. I had seen behind the curtain and what it's really like. I was asked about two years before I said yes if I would do it...I said no because I was worried about the harassment of my children.”

“I thought about it. I have children. And I really genuinely think it's worth it. Having effective representation and diverse representation is just so necessary. We think it's important for the world to have leaders who care.”

“When I first ran, I didn't expect to get elected. It was my first time putting my hand up. I was encouraged by others. I assumed that I wouldn't get elected that first election. It all happened so quickly that I didn't have time to weigh up the positives or negatives.”

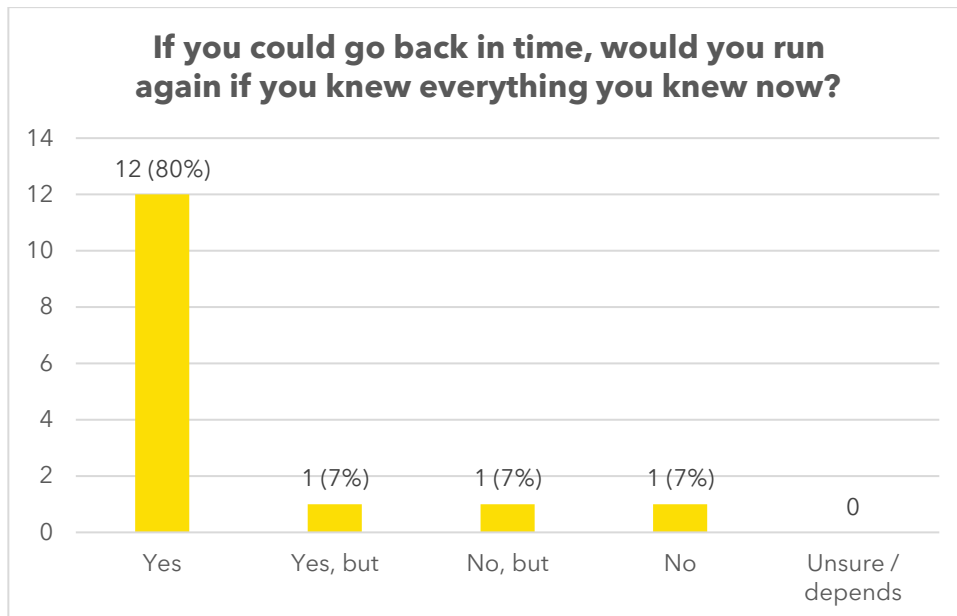
“It never crossed my mind. It's kind of my personality to just go for things. I was aware it wouldn't be an easy road. Perhaps it was a different landscape back then, but it isn't something that I really thought about.”

“No, however I did know it was out there. You know people are cruel to others online, but you don't think about what you'll experience as much when running.”

“No, it was just embarrassing putting my name up and asking them to donate money to help me get a job.”

### **If you could go back in time, would you run again if you knew everything you knew now?**

Overwhelmingly, participants said they would still run for office. They felt the positive impact they have had and can continue to have in their role outweighed any of the obstacles and negativity that they have had to overcome. They believed in the possibility of a better future. They also emphasized how important it was that thoughtful and caring people were representing their communities. They felt if they stood down, they were ceding power to those who may not have the best interests of their communities at heart. For the people who said no, but or outright no, there was an acknowledge of the heavy personal toll that it takes to be in office. Was it worth the trade off of their own mental health and happiness? Ultimately though, both also emphasized the positive impact they could have in their roles, and they wanted to use it for good.



“Yes on balance. This conversation is focused on one of the most negative parts of the role, but it's a small part and it doesn't outweigh what you can achieve improving the lives of others.”

“I'm not going to let them win. You always face challenges. Ultimately, it's a small group of people who are nasty and vile and hide behind their keyboards.”

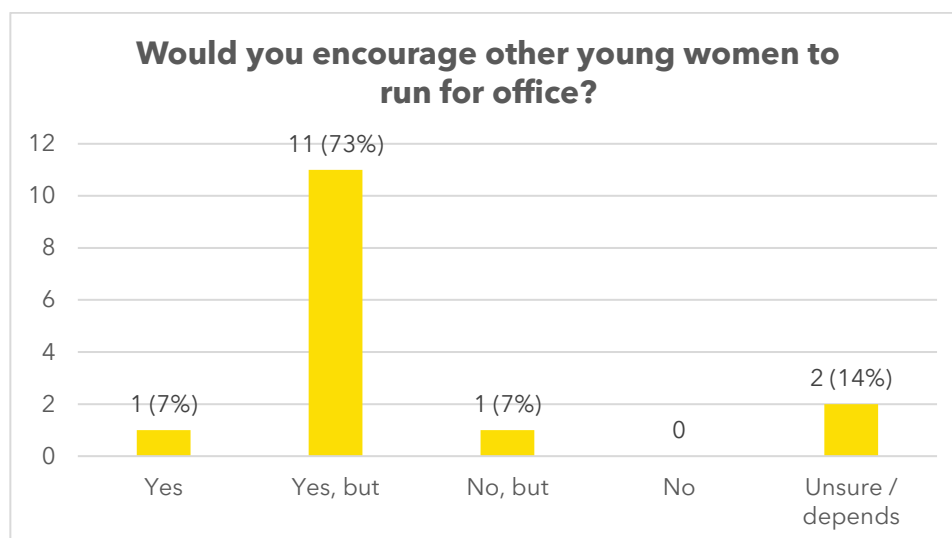
“No I wouldn't. I don't know how to say this...We don't want to be in these roles, but we have to, and we're privileged to have gained these roles...Our voices and our movement is needed so much right now.”

“Yes, because it is a massive privilege, and if it's affecting change on a large scale that you're wanting to achieve, it's one of the main ways to do it. Everything I've gained from this position is worth it. Everyone knows that this is a robust place, not everyone is going to like you, but that's life you won't please everyone. People should come here knowing they must set up support systems. Nothing good is easy...As we talk about these things, we need to find the balance between the positive and benefits of roles like these. It's important for people to be aware. In positions of leadership, you will face some stuff and it's not pretty, but put in place supports to deal with this. I try not to lay it on too thick. I don't want to put people off for standing. My experience won't be the same as someone else's. There are ways to manage it, and it shouldn't put people off from standing.”

“Probably not, but the toothpaste is out of the tube. I have put myself in the public environment now...I put myself out there, and I may as well do something with it. But knowing what I know now I probably wouldn't go down this path with how public I'm making my life. People will say you choose to make yourself open to the public...You have to think about everything you say to anyone though. Everything you do, even if it's going to dinner, people will watch what you eat, people will watch who you're with. I've even had people commenting on how I'm reacting to a movie we're both at. You'd be amazed how many people are talking about you to other people. Everyone is watching you all the time and talking about it. I think about would I have a happier life if I got to be anonymous?”

### Would you encourage other young women to run for office?

Overwhelmingly, participants also actively encouraged other people to run, but these yeses came with many more caveats than the yes that they would still run themselves. Interviewees would not recommend the job to everybody, and underscored how important it is for candidates to come into the field aware of the political dynamics and with the right support systems. This job has broken people down, sometimes quite publicly, and everyone acknowledged the risks that come with stepping into the role. Again though, they equally emphasized the need for smart, empathetic, community-driven women to become leaders. Because if they don't stand, those spaces are filled by people who will contribute to an increasingly polarized environment.



- “It's important for women to know you can step in this role, you can be strong enough, you will get a bit of shit, but your team will rally around you, your community will rally around you. Seeing the worst, those 3-4 incidents that were extreme, you also see the best. You see your staff say this is just shit. We'll look after you. We'll work through this together. You see your community push back on it online and say, 'You need to be more grateful, you're wrong here.' Beyond that you can still get on and do your job and affect positive change. There will be some outliers. I love my job and I love my community, and they do rally. 99.9% of my community are great, and we're talking about outliers.”
- “Yes. I will always and do always encourage others to run. By normalizing diversity and difference in our representation, it's an important and key way that we can stop othering each other and stop that ability for certain groups of people to hone in on individuals. I would always caution people to go in with eyes wide open though. There's very real risk here, and any one person has to weigh those up with their own decision making.”
- “I just believe in democracy. I'm so hopeful and optimistic that we can change things. I don't want anyone to put anyone in a position where they can be harmed, but we can't let bullies stop progress with their gross tactics.”
- “Yes, but caveated with there is support available. It's not easy. It depends on what office you're running for...I spend a lot of time encouraging people to stand. I talk to them about the tools and support available.”
- “No but you have to. It's bigger than that. We're not here for the 3-year government. We're here for generations and lifetimes. That's how far our foresight is going and what rights should we have...It's not for defending or attacking this government it's so our people can hear us from within Parliament.”
- “It's not a career choice. It's a legacy choice we would never say no to. Careers come and go it's temporary. You kind of get spit out. The legacy movement that we have is inevitable.”
- “Absolutely as long as you have a good support team around you.”
- “Absolutely. I think it's important that we encourage activation and voice. Even though the rigor of the work and the workload is something people need to be prepared for. I absolutely support any young woman that wants to get into local and central government, but also I support them to have awareness of the expectations...Are they prepared to answer questions around personal questions and work? Are they prepared for the critique? Are they prepared for the rigor? I'd have 3 meetings a day in places that are 5 hours away from each other.”
- “I'm not sure I would. The landscape has changed so much. It doesn't feel safe. There's a level of resilience that you need to come into the space now, and I don't think I needed it to the same extent as before. I would want them to be well equipped. I wouldn't discourage, but I want them to be informed.”

“Yes because we need young woman, but be really open it comes with a price. You do have to be conscious of your safety in public safety. It's not just the harassment you face but also your family. You need to take in the time and losing your privacy.”

“Yes, but I'd first like to make sure their support systems are in place before they do. Before, I was like stand for office we all need to. Now I've become less vocal, because I don't want to put them in that position. What can I do to help create that safe environment to come into? I was quite lucky that I had an informal support network to help me get through last year. Not everyone will have that. We've seen people get to the bottom, because they didn't have it. I just want to make sure that other women have something. I don't think it exists at the moment.”

“I would say yes, but caveated with there is support available. It's not easy. It depends on what office you're running for...I spend a lot of time encouraging people to stand. I talk to them about the tools and support available.”

## Effects on Staff

Several interviewees shared instances where staff are also affected by either physical or online violence. As previously mentioned, this is an overlooked part of online violence, but the effects on staff are similar to politicians. It affects their mental health, and it could have a chilling effect on their willingness to work in critical roles in a political organization. They also feel the need to protect the politician from online violence and might deal with incidents and process the effects on their own. Staff needs support as well, and future research should delve into how exactly these dynamics play out at the staff level who are critical to the success of any politician.

“It's actually harder for staff sometimes. I've chosen to put my hand up and put myself before the community and be judged, but staff take the criticisms more to heart.”

“I had another woman staffer of the same ethnicity as me, and this man on the street got really abusive and aggressive with her. He might have thought she was me.”

“They felt like they had to do a role of fixing it and protecting me [in response to vandalism at an electorate office]. It's not fair for them. I do feel for elected office staff. There have been so many incidents of just damage to the electorate office doors or protestors outside and people calling and emailing the office.”

“It wasn't just me. My staff members felt unsafe too and their partners. One of my staff member's husband would show up at events to make sure we were safe. He was concerned everyone knew where we were going to be.”

These direct messages were sent directly to the staff member I interviewed:

I hope your family dies during Christmas you pathetic low life junkie cunts.

You're disgusting

## Support Networks & Coping Mechanisms: "It's been my foundation."

Personal, community, and institutional support was a major theme in all the interviews. Participants leaned on their partners, family members, community members, party colleagues, staff, senior women, and counsellors to help them both push back on some of the online violence and process the emotional burden of it. Interviewees emphasized the importance of having a support network that one can be vulnerable with and will also have your back. Institutional policies and systems, such as party-funded counselling and the parties' women caucuses, were also frequently brought up as essential sources of support. Participants with a background in community organizing or volunteering before stepping up for elected office emphasized the support that they felt from their local communities. They felt that the community relationships and goodwill they built before coming into office were critical to their success once elected.

However, not everyone deals with online violence or experiences support in the same way. One interviewee rarely discusses the online violence she experiences with anyone. Discussing it would affect her mental health more than completely ignoring it and focusing on her job. One participant also observed that women can be a part of a problem as much as the solution. When women verbally abuse other women, the abuse can be harsher and even more personal than from men.

A few women also highlighted a major discrepancy in resources allocated to safety at the local versus central level of government. All of the safety risks discussed in this report exist for public officials at any level of government, and local government officials discussed being even more accessible to their communities with fewer supports. They don't have access to Parliamentary security and its resources or party supports such as free counselling or staff to help manage their communications. They often have to navigate the issue of safety and figure out solutions on their own.

“Coming up through a community structure and knowing my community, I wasn't worried about harassment. I was worried about exposing my life to the community and putting myself out there for judgement. It's different than harassment, and I think women probably give that a lot of different thought... The community though is hugely supportive, and I have good relationships with the wider community. I even see them jumping to my defense online.”

“When I'm out and about women will come up to me and say, 'We've got you.' That helps a lot those little touches. It's the quiet network.”

“The biggest thing is family. I'm so privileged and entitled to say that. Whānau - if I don't have my family I would not be here. I would have left and said I'm not strong enough to do this. It's been my foundations that have been so strong. My parents, grandparents, partner, siblings. It's been a group team family effort. It's the family. It's my village. It's the family dynamic that's the key to my success.”

“I talk with my husband and CEO and know how to manage it. I used to not tell people about it, but once you tell someone you've shared the problem and it's less of a burden.”

- “My husband is a stay-at-home dad, and I have a village of people...I'm lucky I have a community online that defends me. That's organic. That's their own conviction that they jump in.”
- “I have a close crew of friends and we're all Māori. We get together once every two weeks and we approach the conversation in a very well-being Tikanga Māori view...We have an agreement that our ancestors are watching us and looking over us. That sort of spiritual support.”
- “I also ensure that I have people who I can vent to who I trust and offload with. I'm pretty lucky to have a close group of friends and family I can do that with.”
- “I have supportive friends and a partner and workmates. I stay off social media, and I talk to people I trust who will be honest and supportive...I go to counseling and have someone to talk to there too. Even when I talk to my friends and partner, I only tell them 30% of what's happening, because I don't want to trauma dump. It's helpful to have someone that is paid that I can talk about all this stuff with.”
- “A lot comes down to the support staff I have. I have a team of really amazing people who I know I can talk to and have a cry to and people to email people back and say to leave me alone.”
- “We bring issues like this to the women's caucus. Last year it came up every week talking about security and the processes involved and incidents and how we can learn from each other. We have a very collegial caucus. The men are really good as well...We made the men conscious, and they were serious about it.”
- “We talk about some of the bullshit that happens. When we see people that are being impacted we check in to see how they are doing, because you don't want to leave anyone alone.”
- “The Labour party funds counselling for all MPs. There's no shame.”
- “I had come across Brene Brown for the first time, and her frameworks around shared vulnerability has been really helpful...I share it with other women.”
- “Having a few different women MPs has been really crucial. They were active in supporting women candidates. It was women supporting women. I've supported 4-5 women getting selected. As you become more senior your influence heightens. Women have got to support other women.”
- “Have a group of people who aren't in politics you can talk to. A safe space to vent in. Have other stuff in your life you enjoy doing that's not politics related. Actually chart some time out. Talk to your colleagues. See a therapist.”
- “At this campaign debate, I had people who were anti-vax, anti-authoritarian, anti-Labour...all the candidates were female from all the parties. We were all almost ready to walk out of the debate because we couldn't answer a question without getting interrupted or yelled at. I always have supporters though in the crowd, and I felt comfortable continuing because I knew I had supporters there.”



- “I used to wake up every morning and worry about what people had said about me, but now I care a lot less. I know there's a lot more people that would come to my defense.”
- “I've never talked to anyone about it. I'll occasionally talk to one of my female colleagues about it, but I'll avoid engaging...By talking about it and recalling it, it makes me very uncomfortable. Talking about it, recalling it, maybe it's my form of denial. It's a coping mechanism. If I paid it attention, it would stop me doing my job.”
- “It's an observation over time, that women tend to be much harsher on other women.”
- “The one thing we don't get as local government is any level of protection that our central government gets. Our male MP's wife has never been harassed, but she has a panic button in her home. There's definitely a disproportionate allocation of security. You're equally high profile and more accessible to your community in a local context. There's a disparity between central and local government. Those closer to the community are actually more vulnerable targets.”
- “The other observation is from friends in local government. In some ways local government is harsher in person, because it is so local. People feel more personally connected because it's people in their neighborhoods and their streets. Mine are sometimes a bit more removed. I've heard from female councilors and mayors that in person it's a lot more than they anticipated.”
- “One of my criticisms of local government is there's very little support. When I was councilor there was really no help. I wouldn't want to step back into that space. It's unsupported, and you feel on your own.”

## Accessibility's Double-Edged Sword

Kiwi politicians are famously accessible to their communities. Many of the politicians I spoke to, particularly those in local government, took pride in how accessible they were to their constituents. They work, raise their kids, go to the gym, shop and do all the things that constitute a life in their communities. Several give out their personal phone numbers to anyone in their community who wants it, they have regular community clinics, and anyone can set up a meeting with them. Everyone interviewed genuinely wants to hear from constituents so that they can better represent and advocate for their needs. However, accessibility is a double-edged sword. Accessibility can also present a safety risk to public officials. It opens them up to both physical and online violence, and the risk has escalated in recent years. There is a sense that political rhetoric and action has become more toxic, particularly after COVID and the high-profile protests that occurred in 2022. Participants want to remain accessible and accountable to their communities but have had to balance safety concerns with it. Many no longer use sign-written cars, think twice about posting their locations online, and several brought up the fact that they felt uncomfortable their addresses are publicly available on campaign returns.

- “All my contact and phone numbers are online. I want to be really accessible to communities. If I'm free, I'll answer the phone even if it's an unknown number.”
- “This job is 7 days a week. Anything I get invited to in the community, I'll go to. I'm available. I give out my phone number. I'm very direct and up front.”

- “Access to politicians is quite special here. I'm very mindful of balancing safety with the need to keep that access. I haven't really had physical abuse it's mostly online. I don't feel I'm at a point where I need to cut out going to stuff.”
- “There's that saying familiarity breeds contempt. People often comment on how amazing it is you can access your member of parliament in New Zealand. You see them walking around in the grocery store. You see them walking around on Saturday in the community. You can contact my office and set up a meeting. We're normal people you can see me. The flip side of that informality is the ease of access has flipped into 'I've got access to you. I can do and say as I like.'”
- “There are places I won't go. You know there's an increased risk of being harassed. You make educated decisions on what's suitable or not. What's suitable to do in a political logo or what you would go to alone or not and other calculated estimates. There are events in certain places where I'm prone to things being shouted at me. If I'm going me as an individual rather than me representing a political party, that's less threatening usually.”
- “There was a UK parliamentarian that got stabbed a few years ago. I don't go to an MP clinic by myself anymore. I always have staff. We have in the back of our mind the security process... But politicians are super accessible here, and we don't want that to change.”
- “During the time of COVID, when tensions were running high, there were some extreme examples. People felt very comfortable to confront you in the street. That happened multiple times to the extent where I did not feel comfortable driving a sign ridden car anymore.”
- “During COVID, things got quite heightened. We were getting stopped in the street by people who were angry about the decisions. That made me feel unsafe. I made the decision to not have a sign ridden car. I didn't want people waiting by my car while at the supermarket.”
- “I used to have constituent clinics that I would post online. I became nervous about posting it online, because I didn't know who would show up and feel unsafe.”
- “In New Zealand, unless you opt out of the electoral roll, your personal home address is released to the public. That should be by default you opt out. Recently we had to disclose donations, and they just have to go to the return, and there is the name of every MP and their address. The electoral commission won't allow us to use our professional address instead of personal.”
- “When we campaign, your address is available...When you put it in your campaign return, it has your address and it's publicly available. That's a real problem. How do we be open and transparent and publicly accountable but not put public officials at risk by overexposing things the public doesn't need to know?”

**V. What are different approaches to addressing the issue of online violence?**

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In this report, I sort potential interventions to address online violence into three categories: individual-level support, community-level responses, and systemic changes. Although online violence disproportionately affects women and other marginalized communities, these interventions would support and empower any individual who has been the victim of online violence, regardless of their identity.

This list is non-exhaustive and is a compilation of interventions from research and interventions that interviewees suggested in our conversations.

**Supporting Individuals:** How can we help individuals prevent, mitigate, and build resilience in the face of online violence?

- Provide candidates and politicians at all levels safety training, tools and security
- Provide free counselling for both elected officials and their staff
- Strengthen support networks
- Use AI tools to remove hate speech from social media accounts
- Create a fund for victims to sue for defamation
- Remove any requirements for candidates to publish their address

**Community Change:** How can we work to prevent acts of online violence within a community and educate community members to better respond to incidents?

- Invest in local communities to build social trust, combat isolation, and create greater awareness of the harmful effects of online violence
- Develop trainings and codes of conducts for media members on gendered and racialized online violence and hate speech
- Train all actors in the justice system (e.g., police, judges) on how to better handle cases of online violence
- Invest in further research on the issue of online gender-based violence

**Systemic Change:** How can we create a system that holds perpetrators and technology companies accountable for preventing and addressing the harm from online violence?

- Updating the Harmful Digital Communications Act
  - Reviewing the “intent to harm” requirement
  - Separating out and criminalizing certain offenses
  - Embedding restorative justice
  - Reconsidering whether the approved agency should be a contractor or new agency
- Pass new legislation to regulate social media and technology companies to:
  - Increase transparency
  - Add preventative measures
  - Requires faster responses times
  - Add new safety features
  - Create new enforcement mechanisms

a. **Supporting Individuals:** How can we help individuals prevent, mitigate, and build resilience in the face of online violence?

**1. Provide candidates and politicians at all levels safety training, tools and security**

Many interviewees expressed a desire to have training and more effective tools to protect themselves online. The online landscape is constantly changing, and they have had to figure out their approach, boundaries, and response largely on their own.

Digital safety training and toolkits could be provided to candidates, elected officials, and staff through several channels including political parties, Parliamentary security, and organizations such as Local Government New Zealand. Several internship organizations have already put together toolkits that could be built upon and tailored to a New Zealand environment. [ShePersisted's digital toolkit](#) has steps to take to preempt, report, and respond to online violence with specific advice on how to discuss reproductive rights which can catalyze particularly intense violence against politicians. PEN America, a nonprofit working to protect freedom of expression, has put together [an online harassment field manual](#) which also provides resources for employers and witnesses / allies.

As noted in the interview findings, local elected officials need just as much support as national level officials. This includes tools for both their online safety as well as physical safety. How can organizations such as LGNZ or Parliamentary security share their experience protecting national elected officials with local council security and local police? What types of physical security measures, such as a panic button, should be adopted to the local level as well?

Toolkits and trainings should not only provide practical and technical advice on how to keep oneself safe online, but they should also provide people with a toolkit to take care of themselves. As clearly demonstrated in the interview findings, responding and building resilience to online violence requires general physical, mental, and emotional wellness. Candidate, elected officials, and staff should be encouraged to prioritize habits that ensure the job is sustainable for them and does not cause burnout.

**2. Provide free counselling for both elected officials and their staff**

Experiencing online violence is a form of trauma. People's needs and responses may differ as a result of the trauma, but for many, counselling has been enormously helpful in overcoming the trauma of online violence. Several interviewees shared how even with incredible personal support networks, counselling is still an essential way to process all the emotional turmoil that may come with public office. Some also felt guilty constantly sharing so many heavy experiences with their friends and family, and counselling provided a designated, paid outlet to support them.

The Labour Party already provides free counselling to all its elected members. Other parties could follow in its footsteps and all could consider supplementing the four sessions a year staff members have access to. City councils could also consider doing the same for their elected members and staff as well.

### **3. Strengthen support networks**

Peer networks can be an invaluable source of support and guidance for those navigating the challenges of public life, particularly when it comes to managing online hate. More seasoned politicians and staff can offer crucial advice and strategies to their less experienced colleagues. They can share practical tips on how to protect personal information, manage social media interactions, and set boundaries to maintain mental and emotional well-being. These peer networks create a space for collective wisdom, and beyond professional advice, these networks also offer a safe space where individuals can share tough experiences and find empathy. They know they are not alone in their struggles.

### **4. Use AI tools to remove hate speech from social media accounts**

There are frightening ways AI can be used to incite online violence, but it can also be used as a tool to mitigate some of the effects. [Researchers](#) and [technology companies](#) are creating new tools to identify and remove hate speech from online platforms. With malign creativity and the [implicit nature of some hate speech](#), AI alone will never be able to combat online violence. However, instead of relying solely on human moderators, it can be a useful tool to help detect and avoid the most obvious forms of online violence.

### **5. Create a fund to allow victims to sue for defamation**

A few interviewees brought up the financial challenges of pursuing defamation cases. Pursuing a defamation case can be a fraught and expensive process, even when there is clear evidence for it. As one interviewee put it, "There's no one that helps you take up a defamation case. I want a level of legal protection in this place. Your workplace should support and pay for it. The workplace and job are what's putting you at risk...I know some who have wanted to take up a defamation case, but the financial barrier prevented them."

Defamation is a crime which can have serious repercussions for an individual's career and personal life. It's also a crime that there is often no accountability for, because of the financial and logistical challenges of pursuing a lawsuit. So, similar to providing free counselling, how can parties, Parliament, city councils, and other organizations, such as LGNZ, provide legal defamation support for those who need it?

### **6. Remove any requirements for candidates to publish their address**

Several interviewees raised the dangers of requiring candidates to publish their address through campaign donation disclosures and campaign returns. This raises the question why do candidates have to share their personal home address? Why are they not allowed to use their electoral office address or Parliamentary address if they are already in office? If there are no clear benefits of requiring the publication of personal home addresses which outweigh the potential risk to candidate and elected official's safety, it may be time to change this policy.

## **b. Community Change:** How can we work to prevent acts of online violence within a community and educate community members to better respond to incidents?

### **1. Invest in local communities to build social trust, combat isolation, and create greater awareness of the harmful effects of online violence**

The root causes of why people commit acts of online violence are varied. It may include declining trust in public institutions, social isolation, populism and a feeling of being left behind, misogyny, xenophobia, and more. No singular intervention will be able to fix these root causes, although other countries have been experimenting with new ways of rebuilding trust and connections at a local level.

In 2017, the United Kingdom launched the Innovation Fund to Counter Hate and Extremism. The model involved partnering with the non-profit, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) to administer the program and with Google to fund it. The fund invited local organizations to submit proposals to counter hate and extremism tailored to their local contexts. Ultimately, £15 million in grants were awarded with 22 local and national initiatives funded across the country. Grants ranged from £8,000 to £100,000 for 6 month and 12 month project durations.<sup>xix</sup> Below are a few examples of the projects that were funded:

- Remember Together was a new initiative by British Future and the British Legion that united people from different backgrounds to learn about a shared First World War history. It included the story of the 400,000 Muslims who fought for Britain.
- Two speakers who have previously been involved in extremist organisations or activities (one from an extreme right viewpoint and one from an Islamist extremist viewpoint) were invited to speak to young people about the themes of Faith, Identity and Belonging. These talks were delivered in parallel with photography and creative writing competitions.
- Create the News provided knowledge and skills to students as they began to interact with social media. Through workshops, 11-14 year olds were supported to script and produce short animations that explore the nature of propaganda from multiple perspectives.
- The Internet Safety for Women project worked with mothers, grandmothers and other women from hard to-reach areas and sought their advice on what they need to keep their children safe.
- In a project to challenge extremism in Somali communities, they focused on organising workshops, discussion groups and talks that enabled all generations of Somali society to discuss their fears, experiences and understanding of extremism and radicalisation. The project used word of mouth, TV and radio to reach a wide cross-section of the Somali community.

[Australia's Stop it at the Start campaign](#) is a national public awareness campaign that "aims to prevent gender-based violence by influencing change to attitudes and behaviours that support or condone gender-based violence." It works to prevent



attitudes of disrespect and violence supportive attitudes in young people aged 10-17 years old. They have created several [TV ads](#) released in different languages, national competitions for young Australians to promote respect, resources for adults to have conversations with young people, and tailored resources for First Nations.<sup>xxx</sup> The national government, state, and territory government all contribute to funding the program with the national government providing \$24.1 million from 2021-23 for the campaign.<sup>xxxi</sup>



## 2. Develop trainings and codes of conducts for media members on gendered and racialized online violence and hate speech

A negative media environment was mentioned by several interviewees as contributing to online gender-based violence. Participants feel the media environment is biased to report only on negative stories and often contributes to the problem by writing biased stories or using gendered language.

*"Language is so gendered even in mainstream. I thought it was the fringes and random people but when you see it it's mainstream trusted sources."*

To address this, the National Domestic Institute recommends media organizations, newsrooms, and journalists should be "trained to engage in responsible fact-checking and receive confirmation before reporting on potentially dangerous stories. They should also be trained to prevent derailing political conversation by reporting on women's policies rather than rumors or even the fact that they have been subject to information attacks. Training should include information on how to report on women in politics and public life in a way that is gender-informed, and on regulating hate speech or abusive comments on articles."<sup>xxxii</sup>

Not only can media reduce the harm they cause, but they can also support women who wish to speak out on the issue and ensure that their own women-identifying journalists, who are also frequently the targets of online gender-based violence, are supported and protected.

### **3. Train all actors in the justice system (e.g., police, judges) on how to better handle cases of online violence**

Actors in the justice system should also be appropriately trained on the severity of gender-based online violence. They must recognize misogyny as a form of hate speech and the seriousness of it. They must be trained on how technology, including newly developing ones such as AI, are used to perpetuate online violence. They must understand how gender-based and racial violence are often intertwined.

Interviewees generally reported neutral or positive experiences with the police when they reported threats to their safety. However, one interviewee who had a serious physical incident of harassment and felt not only unsupported by the police, but her case was actively diminished and deprioritized. She acknowledged that we need police, but it should spark a conversation on how the police are approaching cases regarding politician safety.

### **4. Invest in further research on the issue of online gender-based violence**

As previously discussed in this report, there are large gaps in the research on online gender-based violence. The research that does exist tends to focus on currently active politicians. (The [National Democratic Institute compiled an excellent landscape tracker](#) for some of the existing research on online gender based violence as a whole.) Little to no research exists on political candidates, staff, former politicians, and how it affects people's willingness to run in the first place. How seriously does the general public take this issue? What methods work to raise awareness and educate people about this issue? These are important areas for future research to understand the impact of online violence beyond politicians themselves.

## **c. Systemic Change: The Policy, Politics, and Risks of Passing Legislation**

### **i. The Policy: What is the Harmful Digital Communications Act (HDCA)?**

New Zealand's legislative response to online violence is the Harmful Digital Communications Act (HDCA), passed in 2015. The Act defines digital communication as "any form of electronic communication," including "any text message, writing, photograph, picture, recording, or other matter that is communicated electronically," and "harm" as "serious emotional distress."<sup>xxxiii</sup> The act has ten communications principles which state that digital communications should not:

- disclose sensitive personal facts;
- be threatening, intimidating, menacing;
- be grossly offensive;
- be indecent or obscene;
- be used to harass an individual;
- make a false allegation;
- contain information published in breach of confidence;
- incite or encourage anyone to send a harmful message to an individual;
- incite or encourage an individual to commit suicide;
- belittle someone because of their colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The law's purpose is two-fold: 1) "to deter, prevent, and mitigate harm caused to individuals by digital communications;" and 2) "to provide victims of harmful digital

communications with a quick and efficient means of redress.<sup>xxxv</sup> The Act includes a pathway for civil redress for victims and introduces a new criminal offense of “causing harm by posting a digital communication,” which carries the penalty of imprisonment for up to two years or a fine of up to \$50,000. An approved agency, which Netsafe has been designated as, is responsible for addressing civil complaints and has the power to do the following:

- Receive and assess complaints about harm caused to individuals by digital communications;
- Investigate complaints;
- Use advice, negotiation, mediation, and persuasion (as appropriate) to resolve complaints;
- Establish and maintain relationships with domestic and foreign service providers, online content hosts, and agencies (as appropriate) to achieve the purpose of this Act;
- Provide education and advice on policies for online safety and conduct on the Internet.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Depending on the complaint and Netsafe’s investigation of it, it may also be referred to the District Court for further action. The District Court can order an online host to:

- Take down or disable public access to material that has been posted or sent;
- Release the identity of the author of an anonymous or pseudonymous communication to the court;
- Publish a correction;
- Give a right of reply to the affected individual;
- Order an Internet protocol address provider (IPAP) to release the identity of an anonymous communicator to the court.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

There are a wide variety of factors that courts must consider for either a civil or criminal offense. Some of the factors are:

- the content of the communication and the level of harm caused or likely to be caused by it
- the purpose of the communicator, in particular whether the communication was **intended** (emphasis added) to cause harm
- the occasion, context, and subject matter of the communication
- the extent to which the communication has spread beyond the original parties to the communication
- the age and vulnerability of the affected individual
- the truth or falsity of the statement
- the conduct of the defendant, including any attempt by the defendant to minimise the harm caused

Almost ten years after the passage of the HDCA, what has been its impact? Netsafe is the independent non-profit that has been contracted by the government to implement the act. Netsafe’s annual report states they received around 5,000 HDCA complaints in 2023. Of those complaints, 3,370 breached one of the 10 communications principles with harassment of an individual (39%) and disclosing sensitive personal facts (21%) as the most common violation.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Netsafe states that they successfully resolved 94% of complaints with 98% of complaints resolved in less than fifteen days and 100% resolved in less than thirty days.<sup>xxxix</sup>

However, Netsafe's rosy annual report elides major deficiencies in HDCA's policy and Netsafe's implementation of it. What does it mean to "resolve" a complaint? Timeliness of response is important, but do complainants feel they received adequate support and that their issue has been resolved? Netsafe does not provide any data on this, but there is at least one public example in which Netsafe provided private information about two women to their convicted stalker who then used this information to countersue both the victims. Netsafe supported the perpetrator's allegations without investigating them and then refused to provide any documentation to the women to defend themselves in court.<sup>xi</sup> This led to severe and extended harm for the victims, one of who had already been diagnosed with PTSD as a result of the abuse she experienced, who had to fight the perpetrator's false allegations against them for three years in court.<sup>xii</sup> In their response, Netsafe did not announce any changes to their internal policies to prevent this from happening again.<sup>xiii</sup>

In the worst case scenario, Netsafe further victimized people and caused additional harm by violating their privacy. There are other examples in which Netsafe may not adequately support complainants. In their 2023 annual report, they discuss receiving 1,707 reports of sextortion, a form of blackmail where scammers threaten to share intimate images or videos unless their demands are met and provide a case study on it. They say, "Our advice to victims is to stop all communication with the scammer. They are typically interacting with many victims concurrently, so they focus their attention on victims that have paid money or who continue to engage with them. In most cases, when communication stops the scammer moves on, without following through on their threat to share the images. However, there's no guarantee." What does Netsafe do if the scammers do release the images after a complainant follows Netsafe's advice and stops interacting with the scammer? Do they safety plan with victims on what to do if that happens? Maybe this advice works most of the time, but when it doesn't, which Netsafe acknowledges as a real risk, what are victims supposed to do?

One interviewee also used Netsafe to try and pursue justice against some of her perpetrators of online violence and found the experience extremely frustrating and their advice vastly unhelpful. She shared, "They're just contractors, they're not a government department...I didn't get good advice. They would say we can tell you this is the process, but we can't tell you how to fill out the forms. Here's a link to the forms." I was not able to interview other complainants to Netsafe through this process, but even these incidents suggest potentially systemic issues in Netsafe's processes. These incidents were likely categorized as "resolved," perhaps even within 15 days, in Netsafe's own data. But as clearly demonstrated from even talking to a few victims, they would not consider these incidents resolved.

The substance of the act itself has also come under criticism from victims, specifically the clause on intent to harm. In order to successfully prosecute a case against a perpetrator, the police must prove 1) the perpetrator intended to cause harm; 2) the victim experienced serious harm; and 3) a reasonable person was harmed in that situation.<sup>xiiii</sup> The requirement around intent has been a loophole for many perpetrators. They may claim they were joking, or their real goal was to make money and/or gain social clout. This defense works and can be seen in high-profile cases such as former National candidate, Jake Bezzant, who impersonated his former partners online using their intimate images. The police did not prosecute him, because they were not able to prove his intent to harm.<sup>xlv</sup> In 2021, an amendment was introduced to the HDCA which removes the requirement for intent to harm specifically for sharing intimate images or recordings without a person's explicit consent.<sup>xlv</sup> However, for any other offense that falls under the

HCDA, including deepfakes, defamation, death threats, and threats of sexual violence, victims must still prove intent.

## ii. **The Policy: Updating the HDCA and Holding Tech Companies Accountable**

How can we create a system that holds perpetrators and technology companies accountable for preventing and addressing the harm from online violence? Starting with the HDCA, there are numerous ways it could be updated to be more victim-centered, such as:

- **Reviewing the “intent to harm” requirement.** Victims’ advocates have raised concerns “intent to harm” sets too high of a bar. At what point does the harm become so great that intent to so becomes irrelevant? In the case of nonconsensual use of intimate photos, the amended legislation has decided that the harm is always so great that the intent becomes irrelevant. However, what about other offenses? What about AI deepfakes? What about cases of defamation in which an individual loses their job or suffers other real-world consequences? Are there other instances in which the bar for intent to harm should be lowered or even removed?
- **Separating out and criminalizing certain offenses.** Similar to the nonconsensual use of intimate photos, there are certain offenses that are so severe, they could be dealt with in separate bills and criminalized. For example, other countries have passed specific legislation dealing with issues such as AI deepfakes, protection of minors online, and hate speech that could lead to terrorism or other acts of real world violence.
- **Embedding restorative justice:** Restorative justice is already well-embedded into many parts of New Zealand’s justice system. Online violence is another area in which it could be further utilized, particularly for cases in which the intent to harm requirement may not be met. Victims may not want to see a perpetrator behind bars, but they want the violence to be acknowledged, removed, and to ensure it does not happen again. Restorative justice could be enormously helpful for some victims in achieving this.
- **Reconsidering whether the approved agency should be a contractor or new agency.** As previously discussed, Netsafe has exhibited serious internal breaches of victim privacy and safety, and as an external contractor, it has limited powers to act quickly and effectively in the face of online violence. Online violence is not a frivolous act, and it is often connected with acts of real world violence, such as domestic abuse and stalking, as well. There is an open question of whether or not responding to online violence deserves greater investment, and many countries have expanded the powers of existing agencies or created new agencies to more effectively deal with it. For example, a pending online safety bill in Canada would create a new Digital Safety Commission of Canada and expands the Canadian Human Rights Commission’s powers. The recently passed Online Safety Act in the UK greatly expands the existing Office of Communications Act.

New Zealand could also pass new legislation that holds tech companies accountable for preventing and addressing online violence. Many of the other proposed interventions work after the harm has already been committed (e.g., training individuals, police, and courts to respond) or are quite diffuse in their effects (e.g., investing in communities). Regulating technology companies is one of the only systemic, targeted, and potentially preventive interventions for addressing online violence. Legislation could address the problem from a number of angles including:

- **Increased transparency:** Requiring tech companies to clearly publish their internal policies on how they both respond to online violence and how victims can seek redress; explain their algorithms and how certain content is selected for feeds; and reporting on online violence's frequency on their platforms.
- **Preventative measures:** Requiring tech companies to stop illegal content from even appearing on their website, such as child pornography, or limit potential harmful content, such as self-harm content.
- **Faster responses times:** Requiring tech companies to respond to reported incidents of online harassment within a certain time frame (e.g., 24-48 hours).
- **New safety features:** Requiring tech companies to implement any number of new safety features such as the option of filtering out unverified users; preventing non-verified users from interacting with their content; offering tools to avoid certain types of content (e.g., suicide harm, eating disorders, hate content, etc.); and attaching a label to bot-disseminated harmful content.
- **Enforcement:** Enforcing the above requirements with fines against the corporation, expanding an existing agency's powers or creating a new one, or allowing civil or criminal prosecution of technology company leaders.

In the following chart, I compare online violence legislation that has been passed or is being considered in other Western countries including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, and the United States. The chart compares elements of each of the bills across all the interventions discussed above.

Country	Bill / Legislation Name (Year passed if app.)	Who does it apply to?	Publish internal policies?	Explain algorithms?	Reports on incident rate?	Preventative measures?	Response times?	Safety features for users?	Criminalization?	Expand existing agency / create new?	Fines?	Civil or criminal prosecution of leaders?	Specific rqmts for minors?	Specific national security rqmts?	Bans deep-fakes?	Court challenge?
United Kingdom	Online Safety Act (2024) <sup>xlvi</sup>	Services that allow users to post content online or interact with each other	Yes <sup>1</sup>	Yes <sup>2</sup>	No	Yes <sup>3</sup>	Yes	Yes <sup>4</sup>	Yes <sup>5</sup>	Yes <sup>6</sup>	Yes <sup>7</sup>	Yes <sup>8</sup>	Yes <sup>9</sup>	No	No	No
Canada <sup>xlvii</sup>	Bill C-63 / Online Harms Act (Proposed 2024)	Operators of regulated services	No	No	No	Yes <sup>10</sup>	Yes <sup>11</sup>	Yes <sup>12</sup>	Yes <sup>13</sup>	Yes <sup>14</sup>	Yes <sup>15</sup>	No	Yes <sup>16</sup>	Yes <sup>17</sup>	Yes <sup>18</sup>	N/A
Australia	Online Safety Act (2021) <sup>xlviii xlix</sup>	Protects end-users accessing content from AUS, regardless of whether company has AUS presence	Yes <sup>19</sup>	No	No	Yes <sup>20</sup>	Yes <sup>21</sup>	No	No	Yes <sup>22</sup>	Yes <sup>23</sup>	No	No <sup>24</sup>	No	No	No

<sup>1</sup> Summarize in one clear place measures that can be taken to tackle the abuse women and girls disproportionately face online. Must consult with Victim's Commissioner and Domestic Abuse Commissioner

<sup>2</sup> Annual transparency reports about algorithms and effect on user experience, especially children

<sup>3</sup> Illegal content duties are not just about removing existing illegal content; they are also about stopping it from appearing at all. Platforms need to think about how they design their sites to reduce the likelihood of them being used for criminal activity in the first place. Creates list of priority offenses for which they must do this for.

<sup>4</sup> Option of filtering out unverified users, verify account, prevent non-verified users from interacting with their content, offer tools to avoid certain types of content (e.g., suicide harm, eating disorders, hate content, etc.)

<sup>5</sup> Created new criminal offenses including encouraging or assisting serious self-harm, cyberflashing, sending false information intended to cause non-trivial harm, threatening communications, intimate image abuse, epilepsy trolling

<sup>6</sup> Expanded Office of Comms powers

<sup>7</sup> Companies can be fined up to 18m pounds or 10% of qualifying worldwide rev, whichever is higher

<sup>8</sup> Against senior managers who fail to ensure companies follow information requests or if they fail to comply with enforcement notices in relation to specific child safety duties

<sup>9</sup> Creates priority content areas that children must be prevented access to (pornography or self-harm content) and priority content which they should be given age-appropriate access to

<sup>10</sup> Must work to prevent uploading of content that sexually victimizes a child or revictimizes a survivor; creates a peace bond. This provision would be modelled on existing peace bond provisions in the Criminal Code. It would allow a judge to impose an order requiring a person to keep the peace and be of good behaviour if the judge is satisfied by the evidence that there are reasonable grounds to fear that the person will commit a hate propaganda offence. A judge would be able to impose the peace bond for a period of up to one year, or two years if the defendant has previously been convicted of the above-noted hate offences.

<sup>11</sup> For content that sexually victimizes a child or revictimizes a survivor, and intimate content communicated without consent, including deepfake images

<sup>12</sup> Attach a label to bot-disseminated harmful content, adopt measures that are adequate to mitigate the risk that users of their services will be exposed to harmful content. Harmful content would be defined as intimate content communicated without consent; content that sexually victimizes a child or revictimizes a survivor; content that induces a child to harm themselves; content used to bully a child; content that foments hatred; content that incites violence; and content that incites violent extremism or terrorism.

<sup>13</sup> Creates new general hate crime offense, amends criminal code to create new peace bond to help prevent and deter hate crimes / propaganda, increases maximum punishments

<sup>14</sup> Creates Digital Safety Commission of Canada, allows Canadian Human Rights commission to pursue recourse against posters of hate speech

<sup>15</sup> Up to max 6% of operator's global revenues or \$10 million, whichever is higher

<sup>16</sup> Mandatory reporting of child pornography online by internet service providers

<sup>17</sup> Must preserve content used to incite violent extremism or terrorism for 1 year

<sup>18</sup> Creates a specific duty to make inaccessible to all persons in Canada content that sexually victimizes a child or revictimizes a survivor, and intimate content communicated without consent, including deepfake images

<sup>19</sup> Publish clear processes for lodging complaints

<sup>20</sup> Created Basic Online Safety Expectations to take reasonable steps to minimize risk of harm to users of their services

<sup>21</sup> Must respond to a takedown notice within 24 hours

<sup>22</sup> Expands Esafety Commission's authority

<sup>23</sup> On both the person who posted the material and the provider of the service

<sup>24</sup> Expanded cyber abuse regulation from only minors to include adults



Country	Bill / Legislation Name (Year passed if app.)	Who does it apply to?	Publish internal policies?	Explain algorithms?	Report incident rate?	Preventive measures?	Response times?	Safety features for users?	Criminalization?	Expand /new agency?	Fines?	Prosecution of leaders?	Specific rqmts for minors?	National security rqmts?	Bans deep-fakes?	Court challenge?
Germany	Network Enforcement Act (2017, 2021 amend) <sup>li</sup>	Social media with 2 mil+ users in Ger.	Yes <sup>25</sup>	No	Yes <sup>26</sup>	No	Yes	No	Yes <sup>27</sup>	Yes <sup>28</sup>	Yes <sup>29</sup>	No	No	Yes	No	Yes <sup>30 li</sup>
France	Avia Law (2020) <sup>liii</sup> <sup>liv</sup>	High visibility social media platforms	No	No	No	No	Yes <sup>31</sup>	No	No	No	Yes <sup>32</sup>	No	Yes <sup>33</sup>	Yes <sup>34</sup>	No	Yes <sup>35</sup>
France	SREN (2024) <sup>lvii</sup>	Depends on the provision	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes <sup>36</sup>	No	No	Yes <sup>37</sup>	Yes <sup>38</sup>	Yes	No
United States (CA) <sup>lviii</sup>	Social Media Transparency Act (2022)	Social media >\$100m annual gross rev.	Yes <sup>39</sup>	Yes <sup>40</sup>	Yes <sup>41</sup>	No	No	No	No	No	Yes <sup>42</sup>	No	No	No	No	Yes <sup>43</sup>
United States	DEFIANCE ACT <sup>lix</sup> (Senate 2024)	Allows victims to pursue civil damages	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	N/A
United States	Kids Online Safety Act (Senate 2024) <sup>lx lxi lxii</sup>	Still to be defined	No	No	No	Yes <sup>44</sup>	No	Yes <sup>45</sup>	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	N/A <sup>46</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Clear complaint, appeals, and arbitration procedures

<sup>26</sup> Networks that receive > 100 complaints per year must publish biannual reports on how they deal with the complaints. providers must report if procedures for the automated detection of illegal content are used and, if yes, how they work. Providers must report what training data for the system is used and what procedures for quality assurance or evaluation are in place. Reports must further subdivide the numbers of complaints according to the amount of time it took to remove the flagged content (within 24 hours, within 48 hours, within a week, or at a later date). Information on the new appeals procedure must be added to the transparency report, meaning the number of appeals and the number of cases in which the original decision was revised

<sup>27</sup> Requires social media platforms to proactively report certain criminal activity deemed to be identifiable at first sight to the Federal Criminal Police Authority. Includes dissemination of child pornography, dissemination of propaganda and symbols of anti-constitutional organisation, preparation of a violent action against the state, education and support of criminal and terroristic associations, incitement to hatred, representation of violence. Also possible for law enforcement agencies to demand passwords in certain cases such as suspicion of severe criminal actions of a terrorist group, homicides, etc. Various thresholds of hate speech or threatening speech were also lowered, penalties increased, and anti-Semitic motives are included explicitly as an aggravating circumstance.

<sup>28</sup> Expands Office of Justice powers to supervise compliance

<sup>29</sup> Up to 50 mil euros for noncompliance

<sup>30</sup> Meta, Google, Twitter won lawsuit to prevent proactive turning over of info to police<sup>30</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Remove content that is “clearly illegal” within 24 hours of a complaint, 7 days to investigate if needed. Must remove “clearly illegal” hateful content within 24 hours of notification. apply to content violating “human dignity” or inciting hatred, violence, or discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability

<sup>32</sup> Up to 200,000 euros per incident and up to 20 million euros or 4% of global annual revenue, whichever is higher, if no processes were in place

<sup>33</sup> Must remove flagged child pornography content within 1 hr

<sup>34</sup> Must remove promotion of terrorism content within 1 hr

<sup>35</sup> Struck down by Constitutional Council for infringing on freedom of expression

<sup>36</sup> Grants regulator authority ARCOM for enforcement

<sup>37</sup> Specific sanctions for child pornography

<sup>38</sup> Digital sovereignty requirements for hosting particularly sensitive data

<sup>39</sup> Processes for filing complaints, timeframe for response and resolution, potential actions the company may take

<sup>40</sup> Share data collection practices, advertising algorithms, content promotion mechanisms

<sup>41</sup> Semi-annual reports on current policies and # of actions, views and sharing of actioned content, # of appeals and reversals, and how content was flagged broken down into various categories

<sup>42</sup> \$15,000 USD per violation of requirements per day

<sup>43</sup> Claim it violates US 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment on right to free speech (compelled speech)<sup>43</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Creates a “duty of care” to take reasonable steps to prevent harm for minor users. Require platforms to mitigate harm related to certain mental health disorders, compulsive social media usage, physical violence, sexual exploitation, and drug use

<sup>45</sup> Provide options to limit exposure to cyberbullying, harassment and self-harm content, options to protect privacy and reduce addictiveness. For instance, KOSA would require platforms to limit the ability of other users to communicate with minors, limit personalized recommendation features for minors, limit features that encourage minors to spend more time on the app – including infinite scrolling and auto plays. These platforms would also need to offer parental tools that allow management of a minor user’s privacy, ability to purchase in-app items, and time spent on the platform.

<sup>46</sup> Facing free speech violation criticisms (i.e., over-moderation from social media companies) from the left and the right. Conservative US think tanks have said they would use the law to restrict access to content about sexual and gender identity online.

### iii. The Politics & Risks

Passing legislation to address online violence does not come without risks. Balancing freedom of speech and privacy concerns are two of the largest risks, and online safety legislation in several countries has been sued for these reasons.

- In Germany, social media companies sued to prevent a specific clause in the amendment of the Network Enforcement Act which required them to proactively turn over illegal pieces of content, such as swastikas or posts inciting violence, to the police, because it violates citizens' right to privacy.
- The bulk of France's 2020 Avia Law was overturned by their constitutional court for infringing on people's freedom of speech. The arguments centered around a provision of the law which requires online platforms to take down flagged hateful content within 24 hours. If online platforms do not comply, they risk fines of up to 1.25 million euros. The court ruled that the response time frame was so short and the penalties so high that it would incentivize platforms to remove flagged content, even if it is not actually hate speech.
- In the US, a proposed bill to provide more protections for kids online has run into opposition from both the left and the right. The bill requires online platforms to "limit exposure to cyberbullying, harassment and self-harm content and to provide options to protect privacy and reduce addictiveness."<sup>lxiii</sup> It also requires platforms to implement specific tools to do so including limiting the ability of other users to communicate with minors, limiting personalized recommendation features for minors, and limiting features that encourage minors to spend more time on the app. The Heritage Foundation has said it would use the bill to "restrict access to content about sexual and gender identity online" which has led to a backlash around censorship and freedom of speech from organizations such as the ACLU, Fight for the Future, and the Electronic Frontier Foundation.<sup>lxiv</sup>

In addition to legal action, laws related to online violence, and politicians who advocate for them, are vulnerable to attacks that they are catering to "snowflakes" and furthering a "woke culture."

To mitigate these risks, some legislatures have focused on specific aspects of online violence that there is broad consensus are harmful and should be addressed. These include banning deepfakes, protecting minors, and focusing on national security or counterterrorism concerns. Most people find the idea of a deepfake terrifying, want children to be safe online, and want to prevent terrorism. The links between online violence, misogyny, racism, and violent extremism are well established. As this report has been researched and written, far-right groups have been rioting in the United Kingdom after disinformation based on racist and anti-Muslim assumptions were spread online.<sup>lxv</sup> In one of the most infamous massacres with explicitly misogynistic motives, Elliot Rogers killed six people and injured fourteen people in California after being radicalized as an incel (involuntary celibate) online. The devastating Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 are an example of how online violence led to the deaths of dozens of people in New Zealand. There are also other examples of less high-profile violence such as the attempted murder of two schoolgirls in Auckland in 2022 by another incel.<sup>lxvi</sup> However, any such legislation must still be carefully written and considered. The Kids Online Safety Act in the US demonstrates how a bill's intent can be manipulated to serve other purposes.

Requiring increased transparency from online platforms is likely to also be perceived as less controversial than other regulation. It does not require online platforms to enact any changes, and many of these policies are considered common sense by users (e.g., clearly

posting your policies on how to report hate speech and what the response will be). These requirements have been relatively uncontroversial in most of the jurisdictions that have passed them, except for California where the Social Media Transparency Act is currently being challenged as a violation of free speech.

# VI. Conclusion

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## VI. Conclusion

Online violence is seen as the cost of being a politician, particularly for women and people of color. Criticism and pushback from people are an inevitable part of being an elected politician in a democracy. However, should we be normalizing **all** kinds of criticism and speech? As one interviewee put it, “Do we ask enough if it's acceptable what we do? Well would you say that to someone's face? Would you say that if that person was your mum? What about if it was a man? People say derogatory things about my opposition. But what if someone on the opposite side said that about me, would you be happy? Would you want someone saying that about someone you care about?”

This report underscores that online gender-based violence is not merely an unpleasant side effect of being a public figure but has tangible consequences for politicians, staff, communities, and a country's democracy. Everyone and anyone can be affected by online violence, but online spaces exacerbate misogynistic and racist behavior, further marginalizing women and people of color. The unrelenting and pervasive threat of online violence can deter people from pursuing public service, fearing the inevitable backlash that comes with visibility. We must work to support individuals and communities to prevent, mitigate, and build resilience in the face of online violence. We must hold perpetrators and technology companies accountable for preventing and addressing the harm from online violence. However, it is also crucial to strike a balance—acknowledging and addressing the harmful behavior while also promoting the meaningful impact one can have in public office. It is a role that comes with enormous potential for positive change, to work hand-in-hand with communities for a better future. To that point, I want to end with the words of one interviewee on the importance of this balance:

“One of the main real risks is that there is so much increased understanding and awareness of the hate and vitriol that politicians can get, I shudder to think of the effect that has from dissuading people to run. Even if there are cases such as myself where I haven't been subjected to very targeted attacks, that's not necessarily the perception. It's if you stick your head out, you will get it chopped off. It's about talking to people and being open. It is still possible, and it needs to be possible that good people are filling these roles. You don't have to have this ironclad shield and armor up. You can be a human being and be vulnerable to people saying mean things to you. It can be fun and meaningful and it's important. We need to be talking about that as much as we're talking about the very real issues and challenges and addressing the disgusting behavior.”

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