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Women's Aid submission to the Task Force on safe participation in political life



Women's  Aid

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Introduction

Women's Aid is a national, feminist organisation working to prevent and address the impact of domestic violence and abuse (henceforth DVA) including coercive control, in Ireland since 1974. We do this by advocating, influencing, training, and campaigning for effective responses to reduce the scale and impact of DVA on women and children in Ireland and providing high quality, specialised, integrated, support services. More information on Women's Aid is available on our website womensaid.ie.

While our specific remit is DVA, we have a broader interest in gender equality, as gender discrimination and misogyny are the foundations of violence against women, of which DVA is one but form.

There are similarities between both the underlying beliefs and the tactics of perpetrators of DVA and of abuse of women who engage in political life. In both cases, the abuse is rooted in traditional harmful norms of women's inferiority to men and the desire to "keep women in their place". In both cases, specifically in relation to online abuse, tactics of abuse commonly focus on women's body and sexuality and aim to humiliate and dehumanize them.

As a social change organisation we have a keen interest in political structures and support better representation of women in political life, which we view as essential to ensure gender equality and effectively combat DVA and all forms of violence against women. We are therefore very concerned about the scale and impact of abuse of women in politics.

1. The prevalence of abuse and harassment for those who participate in political life in Ireland.

The University of Galway conducted research in 2020 finding that online abuse and threats of violence against female politicians in Ireland was on the rise. The report highlighted:

- 96% of interviewees reporting they had received social media or email messages that used threatening language or 'hate mail'
- Three quarters reporting they had been threatened with physical violence via online or social media
- Almost two in five had been threatened with sexual violence
- A quarter had been verbally abused in public.¹

These extremely high levels of abuse are reflected internationally. Research shows that women in public life experience quantitatively more and qualitatively worse online abuse than men.² This mirrors trends of online abuse in the general population, which are higher and more violent for women and girls than men and boys, and reflect real world misogynistic attitudes, and sexualised violence³.

Women politicians and activists promoting feminist and progressive issues (such as gender equality or abortion rights) and women from marginalised communities are disproportionately targeted by online violence⁴.

¹ [and-threats-of-violence-against-female-politicians-on-the-rise.htm](#)

² <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/news/2022/03/calling-for-an-end-to-violence-against-women-in-politics>

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics-pub-83331>

³ Plan International, 2020, Free to be online? Girls's and young women's experiences of online harassment, <https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-online/>

⁴ See for example Lucina Di Meco, 2023, MONETIZING MISOGYNY Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally, https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf

2. Experiences of abuse and harassment, including Impacts on the person, the institutions and political life.

The type of online abuse women politicians are subjected to is qualitatively different from men, with abuse focusing on the woman's body, looks or sexuality, including threats of rape, and use of humiliating/sexualised/ images or fake rumours. Abuse of male politicians on the other hand is more focused on their professional actions and policies.

Women politicians are subjected to sexist, dehumanising and aggressive posts, comments and private messages.

Threats of physical and sexual harm are made towards them and their children. Sometimes online violence is a precursor/linked to violence in the physical world. Perpetrators may stalk them online and sometimes offline as well.

Fake or altered images and videos, often with sexualized, content are posted and amplified on social media.

Gender disinformation is also very common. It consists of hate campaigns based on false information or manipulations/distortion of a politician's speeches or positions. These campaigns are rooted in gender bias and misogynistic, anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQI+ discourse, which seeks to portray women politicians as incapable, unqualified, unlikeable and unintelligent, implying that women do not have a legitimate place at the political table.⁵

Abuse of women in politics can often occur across platforms, which means its reach and speed are multiplied and it becomes impossible to have it all removed.

Online abuse is common, frequent, unrelenting, in many cases anonymous and it has a huge impact on women, political life and democracy.

⁵ Lucina Di Meco, op.cit

Impact on individual women

Women's Aid is aware from our work with survivors of DVA, including online abuse, of the severe impacts that such abuse has on women generally, including physical and psychological harm, stress, living in fear, detaching from the online world (which may have relationship, professional and financial consequences).

In addition to the above, women in political life may also be impacted by having to use precious time and resources to combat disinformation, have content blocked, report perpetrators, improve security online and offline on top of their workload. For many women in political life, deciding not to have a presence online for an extended period is not an option, as an online presence is necessary to connect with the public and constituents.

In certain cases, women so targeted may decide to abandon politics altogether, taking a less visible role or be less outspoken, or silent on certain "sensitive" topics.

Impact on the democratic process

Women's Aid is concerned that the high level of violence and harassment, including online abuse, that women in political life experience acts as a barrier for women to enter or remain in politics, thus contributing to women's silencing and exclusion from political life and therefore to gender inequality.

This unrelenting abuse can limit women's and people who are minoritised by society participation in politics, can push progressive, feminist women out of the political arena and impact on the next generation of women and girls, who are discouraged from entering

politics having the awareness all the abuse they are likely to be faced with⁶.

The silencing of women and minority politicians underpins attacks and pushbacks on women's and minority groups and communities' human rights and undermines the democratic process.⁷

It is important to note that freedom of expression and a right to healthy and robust political debate should not be used to provide cover for misogynistic, racist, homophobic or otherwise hateful online abuse. On the contrary, allowing serious online abuse to go unchecked impacts negatively on the freedom of speech of those so targeted, as they will be silenced and may stop participating in public life.

Moreover, this level of very visible, public and unpunished abuse normalises misogynistic language, traditional harmful narratives and discriminating social norms beyond the political sphere, contributing to tolerance of gender based violence in society.

Similar issues have been noted in relation to female journalists in Ireland, who are also in the public sphere and whose work is essential for democracy⁸, and in relation to the impact of online abuse on women in their working lives, which has negative consequences for the individual woman's career and well-being but also on the economy and democracy⁹.

3. Mitigation measures – Measures available to prevent abuse/harassment, protect and support those who experience

6 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/feb/17/gender-trolling-women-rights-money-digital-platforms-social-media-hate-politics>

7 Lucina Di Meo, op.cit

8 Wheatley 2023. Social Media And Online Hostility: Experiences Of Women In Irish Journalism, https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Social_media_and_online_hostility_Experiences_of_women_in_Irish_journalism.pdf

9 E-safety, 2022, Women's experiences with online abuse in their working lives, https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/WITS-Womens-experiences-with-online-abuse-in-their-working-lives_0.pdf

abuse/harassment, and respond to it, including international measures

Aside from noting the personal responsibility of individuals who choose to behave in a hateful and abusive fashion – which is paramount – the bulk of responsibility to prevent online abuse/harassment should be with social media and other relevant online platforms as the enablers providing multiple vehicles for this abuse. Relevant measures are discussed below at point 4.

Section 3 Recommendations:

There are however measures that the government could take to prevent and minimise the impact of online abuse of women generally and women in politics specifically:

3.1. In Ireland the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 created much needed offences in relation to image-based sexual abuse and cyber-stalking.

Women's Aid recommends that this Act is fully resourced (for example continuing resourcing of specific training of AGS and the DPP) and is evaluated to check for any gaps or barriers to effective implementation. This could include monitoring its effectiveness specifically regarding online abuse of women in politics.

3.2 Criminal prosecution is not always the answer, in fact in most cases women simply want harmful content taken down quickly and/or malignant accounts blocked from further posting.

Women's Aid has made recommendations¹⁰ on the recently established Online Safety Commissioner and on online safety

¹⁰ Submissin available at:

https://www.womensaid.ie/app/uploads/2023/07/submission_on_the_general_scheme_of_the_online_safety_and_media_regulation_bill_march_2021.pdf

codes, which, while not specific to women in politics, would certainly be relevant, including:

- That the role of the Online Safety Commissioner is expanded to include responding to individual complaints of image-based abuse and other harmful content¹¹ and facilitating their removal. Failing that, that the Online Safety Commissioner would at least have an appeal role in relation to takedown requests
- The Online Safety Commissioner to have the powers to issue orders to end users to remove from the Internet, socials or personal devices intimate images shared without consent / other harmful content within a very fast time-frame.

3.3. That when there is a dispute in relation to intimate images shared without consent or other allegedly illegal/harmful content, there should be a positive obligation on online services to take down such images/content within strict timelines while their status is being determined.

3.4. A common form of online abuse, particularly of women is 'Doxing' or the sharing of private and identifying information about a particular individual on the internet, typically with malicious intent. While the sharing of information alone may not constitute a criminal offence, if it is accompanied by threats of harm or incitement to harm that individual this should be clearly acknowledged by the Online Safety Commissioner. It should be added explicitly into the categories of harmful content in the Online Safety and Media Regulations Act to ensure that this behaviour is considered relevant to certain provisions of the Online Safety and Media Regulations Act, which can be a mechanism for civil remedies for victims/survivors of online abuse.

¹¹ Including gender disinformation and abusive content targeting women in politics, as discussed in this submission

S46 of the OSMR includes a "SCHEDULE 3 of Harmful Online Content: Offence-Specific Categories", which lists the offences that are included in illegal content for the purposes of the OSMR Act.

An offence is set out in Number 40 of the Schedule, reflecting S4 of the HHCRO Act:

40. Online content by which a person— (a) distributes or publishes a threatening or grossly offensive communication about another person, or (b) sends a threatening or grossly offensive communication to another person, contrary to section 4 (1) of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (distribution etc. of communication with intent to cause harm).

While it might be assumed that doxing with threatening content is covered, it is not a 'named category' in the Online Social Media Regulations (OSMR) Act, this should be made explicit so that victims and perpetrators alike understand this to be the case and for the avoidance of doubt.

There are provisions in the legislation to have categories added to the OSMR Act and we propose that Online Safety Commissioner should propose naming this form of abuse as a distinct category.

3.5. Other initiative to support women in political life subjected to online abuse could include:

- providing training and support on the best use of existing safety, privacy and reporting features
- funding and practical assistance to upgrade physical and digital security
- providing psychological support as needed
- carrying out relevant research and collecting data collection on prevalence, experiences and impact of online harassment;

including specifically abuse and harassment targeting women in politics and public life (for example journalists and activists).

4. Role of social media platforms in online abuse/harassment and measure they take to address it.

Women's Aid believes that it should be the responsibility of social media and other online platforms to proactively **prevent** and quickly **respond** to online abuse.

Our experience is that this is not the case, and it is the person targeted by online abuse who is left with the huge and exhausting task of having content removed or blocked.

The amount of online abuse suffered by women everywhere is proof that no effective prevention is being implemented by platforms.

In relation to responding to reports of online abuse, our experience, in particular with women contacting platforms to have material taken down, is that it can be frustrating and traumatizing. With women not knowing what to do and who to contact, not getting responses, not knowing their rights, nor time-frame for actions and with request for take down or blocking ignored or denied.

Even when a platform eventually takes action to remove harmful content, the harm is often already done and is irreversible, as the content may have gone viral, and it may be impossible to prevent further sharing across other platforms. Cross-platform abuse can be especially challenging to deal with: different platforms have different policies about what content they allow and different systems for reporting abuse, so it is time consuming, traumatising and nearly impossible to have abuse removed from them all.

Similarly, the report on female journalists experiences of online abuse¹² found that:

- the response of social media to reports of abusive posts/accounts is too slow
- the threshold for removal of abusive material is too high
- there is inconsistency in intervention
- platform approach is reactive only, there is no proactive attempt at preventing abuse being posted in the first place
- there is a lack of consequence/disincentives for people engaging in abusive online behaviour.

Women's Aid imagine that women in political life would face the same issues in relation to social platforms response.

#She Persisted¹³, a global initiative addressing gendered disinformation and online attacks against women in politics concludes in their report¹⁴ that self-regulation has entirely failed and things are possibly getting worse as two of the biggest social media platforms are decreasing their focus on safety.

They argue that the social media platforms business model, which is based on increasing user engagement and therefore on "monetizing hate", and their algorithms, which amplify harmful content, are largely to blame for the status quo and need to be globally regulated and made accountable. Women's Aid agrees with this approach and support the creation of comprehensive legal frameworks to protect all women from online abuse.

Section 4 Recommendation:

12 Wheatley 2023, op. cit.

13 See <https://she-persisted.org/>

14 Lucina Di Meco, op.cit

While a global response is needed, in Ireland, the development of online safety codes by the Online Safety Commissioner can be part of the solution. Women's Aid recommends that Online safety codes should:

- 4.1 include clear definitions of online gender based violence
- 4.2 ensure online platforms accountability regarding gender based harm online, especially in relation to how their business model promote amplification of gender disinformation, misogyny and other harmful content
- 4.3 ensure social media and other platforms are made responsible for proactively countering and removing misogynistic content
- 4.4 be obliged to improve moderation and response to users
- 4.5 be obliged to provide identity details of who commits abuses online
- 4.6 take a safety by design approach in relation to Online Violence Against women

5. Role of the Houses of the Oireachtas and Political Parties in addressing abuse/harassment and promoting civil discourse.

Section 5 Recommendations:

In addition to supporting the recommendations above, the House of the Oireachtas and political parties could

- 5.1 Commit to keep online violence against women generally and of women in politics/public life (including journalists and activists) as a visible priority
- 5.2 Not tolerating and actively opposing gender/disinformation and any other form of gender-based online violence against women in politics

5.3 publicly supporting colleagues who are so attacked – particularly male allies speaking up

5.4 Supporting measures aimed at young people which promote gender equality and combat violence against women, such as the reform of SPHE school curricula

5.5 Supporting EU level and international initiatives combating online gender-based abuse and measures to make global tech globally accountable, including requiring appropriate financial contributions from platforms to tackle online abuse.

Conclusion

Women's Aid would like to thank the Task Force for your attention to and consideration of our submission and we are available to discuss the contents with you directly.