



**WESTMINSTER
FOUNDATION FOR
DEMOCRACY**

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

CASE STUDY: THE UNITED KINGDOM

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OVERVIEW

Violence against women (VAW) is a scourge on any society. This paper considers the myriad ways in which this behaviour affects the participation and experiences of women in political life in the United Kingdom. It gives a brief overview of VAW in the general UK population (including the legislative context), before moving on to discuss the prominence of women in UK political life, the role of political parties and parliament, and the experiences of female politicians and activists who have agreed to be interviewed. The paper concludes with recommendations concerning how different actors can come together to counter this worrying behaviour.

At the outset, it should be clarified that violence is not always physical. The United Nations defines violence against women as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.¹

For the purposes of this paper and the interviews quoted herein, VAW can take on physical, psychological, economic, or verbal dimensions, and can allude to behaviours including stalking, harassment and intimidation.

PREVALENCE OF VAW IN THE UK POPULATION

Determining the prevalence of VAW in the general UK population is hindered by the fact that crime statistics are not published in a form which is broken down to the gender of the victim. The Office of National Statistics does publish figures for violent offences where the victim is identified as female in the offence description. The latest statistics available are as follows:²

Table A4: Police recorded crime by offence, year ending March 2011 to year ending September 2016 and percentage change between year ending September 2016 and year ending September 2017

England and Wales		Apr '10 to Mar '11	Apr '11 to Mar '12	Apr '12 to Mar '13	Apr '13 to Mar '14	Apr '14 to Mar '15	Apr '15 to Mar '16	Apr '16 to Mar '17	Oct '16 to Sep '16	Oct '16 to Sep '17	% change between years
19C	Rape of a female aged 16 or over	9,469	9,773	9,646	12,307	18,327	22,517	26,464	24,296	31,505	30
19D	Rape of a female child under 16	2,877	2,777	2,803	3,407	4,463	5,255	5,822	5,355	6,990	31
19E	Rape of a female child under 13	2,243	2,212	2,372	2,835	3,524	4,184	4,369	4,216	4,944	17
20A	Sexual assault on a female aged 13 and over	16,346	15,794	15,518	17,377	23,180	27,848	30,202	29,159	33,386	14
20B	Sexual assault on a female child under 13	4,298	3,991	4,177	5,129	6,288	7,382	7,983	7,505	8,930	19

Source: ONS, *Crime in England and Wales: Appendix Tables Dataset*, 25 January 2018

¹ General Assembly Resolution 48/104 (1993). [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1993.](#)

² These figures are taken from the ONS, *Crime in England and Wales: Appendix Tables Dataset*, 25 January 2018, and were prepared by the House of Commons Library.

Looking at these offences on their own paints only a partial picture.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) *Violence Against Women and Girls Crime Report 2016-2017* outlines the progress made by the CPS over the past decade in prosecuting violent offences including: domestic abuse, forced marriage, harassment, honour-based violence, human trafficking, pornography, prostitution, and rape and sexual offences. The report notes that over a 10-year period, violence against women and girls convictions in the UK have risen by 63%.³ The report also notes that, whilst in 2007-08 this violence accounted for 7.1% of the CPS' total caseload, by 2016-17, this had risen to 19.3%.⁴

EFFICACY OF LEGISLATION

Unlike in some other countries, there is no UK Act of Parliament centring solely on violence against women. In the devolved legislatures, on the other hand, the Welsh Assembly passed a Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act in 2015, and the Scottish Parliament is currently deliberating on a Domestic Violence Bill which tackles similar issues.

In the law of England and Wales, the established legislation most commonly used to combat violent or abusive behaviour is contained, variously, in: section 47 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 ("assault occasioning bodily harm"); section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 "common assault"); section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 ("improper use of public electronic communications network"); and sections 4 and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 ("fear or provocation of violence" and "harassment, alarm or distress"). More recently, sections 2A and 4A of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 were introduced to combat stalking ("offence of stalking" and "stalking involving fear or violence or serious alarm or distress"), and Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 was introduced to combat psychological and financial abuse ("controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship"). Evidently, the Scottish legal system is separate, and a thorough examination of the differences would be outside the scope of this paper.

Since the two stalking offences and the offence of controlling or coercive behaviour are relatively new, it is perhaps worth examining the prosecution rates. The way in which both the stalking and coercive control laws are formulated is significant, since the offences are defined in terms of the impact they have on a victim as opposed to solely focusing on the perpetrator's behaviour. Whilst this victim-centred approach was welcomed by many campaigners, it has arguably proved difficult to convict perpetrators as a result of a lack of widespread training for police and prosecutors in

³ The headline figures highlighted by the report are that convictions have risen from 51,974 to 84,565 ([Crown Prosecution Service, Violence Against Women and Girls Crime Report 2016-2017](#), p. 1).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.5

the cumulative impact of psychologically threatening behaviour. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the police and CPS are not routinely taking allegations of stalking or coercive control seriously, particularly in relation to online behaviour.

Prosecution rates have caused some concern. The CPS's *Violence Against Women and Girls Crime Report 2016-2017* notes that there were fewer prosecutions for both the sections 2A and 4A PHA offences of stalking in 2016 than in the previous year. The conviction ratio for the less serious section 2A offences of pursuing a course of conduct which amounts to stalking with fear or alarm or distress likewise fell from 70% to 69%. There was, however, a rise in the conviction ratio for both section 4A offences of, first, stalking involving fear of violence, and stalking involving serious alarm or distress.

It is more difficult to obtain prosecution figures for the offence of coercive and controlling behaviour, since published Ministry of Justice statistics are not broken down to a sufficiently granular level. The CPS's *Violence Against Women and Girls 2016-2017 Crime Report* suggests that, since the offence was introduced in 2016, 309 offences have been charged and reached a first hearing.⁶

The remainder of this paper concentrates more specifically on violence against women involved in political life in the UK.

OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Amongst the general UK population, women are slightly more likely to appear on electoral registers than men.⁷ Moreover, the tendency to vote in general elections has not generally been affected by a person's gender in any general election since 2001.⁸

When it comes to more active participation in political activities, the difference is starker. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, in 2013/2014, 27.9% of women said they had taken part in political activities in the last 12 months, compared with 32.5% of men. The specified activities were "contacting a councillor, local official, government official or MP (other than on personal issues); attending a public meeting or rally; taking part in a demonstration; signing a petition".⁹

⁶ Crime Prosecution Service (2017). [Violence Against Women and Girls Crime Report 2016-2017](#). London: Crime Prosecution Service, p. 6.

⁷ A total of 85% of women compared with 83% of men appeared on the December 2015 electoral registers (The Electoral Commission, [The December 2015 electoral registers of Great Britain](#), July 2016).

⁸ House of Commons Library (2017). *Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?*. London: House of Commons, p. 31.

⁹ The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2015). [Is Britain Fairer? Evidence papers series, \(J\), Participation, influence and voice domain](#). London: Equality and Human Rights Commission, p. 54.

Women remain to be significantly underrepresented as both candidates and members of parliament. In the 2017 general election, 973 of the overall 3,304 candidates were women (29%). Of those 649 elected, 208 were women. Women thus represent 32% of elected members of the house of commons.¹⁰ To put these figures in historical perspective, since gaining the right to be elected as members of parliament in 1918, a total of 489 women have been elected. This represents only 9% of all members of parliament elected over this time period.¹¹ Evidently, there is considerable ground to be made up.

These figures are important not just symbolically, but for gaining an understanding as to why women politicians experience heightened abuse from some members of the public on account of their gender. Being in the room (or chamber) where decisions are made matters. For as long as women politicians are seen as being in a minority, it is unlikely that full-scale change will happen.

Similarly, and although any speculation as to why comparatively few women choose to stand for election is outside the scope of this paper, it would be reasonable to assume that the many ways in which women candidates (and politicians) suffer intimidation and harassment would be a deterrent to many.

This paper now considers the impact of the aforementioned violent behaviour in greater detail.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

This paper is indebted to a number of parliamentarians and activists who agreed to be interviewed about their own experiences. Their candidness and willingness to discuss these topics should be applauded.

It is not possible to quantify how prevalent VAW in politics is, due to underreporting (the information is not collected centrally), as well as the sheer volume of online abuse directed at women in public life. As one member of parliament told me, “everyone knows it happens; it happens to all women [in politics]”. During the research for this paper, insights were given into just how many forms that violence takes.

In December 2017, the Committee on Standards in Public Life published a report on *Intimidation in Public Life* which acknowledges that:

¹⁰ By contrast, 42% of Welsh Assembly Members are women, compared with 35% of Members of the Scottish Parliament and 28% of the Northern Ireland Assembly. A total of 26% of Members of the House of Lords are women (House of Commons Library, *Women in Politics and Government*, 2017, p. 21).

¹¹ House of Commons Library (2017). *Political disengagement in the UK: Who is disengaged?* London: House of Commons, p. 32.

“The increasing prevalence of intimidation of parliamentary candidates, and others in public life, should concern everyone who cares about our democracy There has been persistent, vile and shocking abuse, threatened violence including sexual violence, and damage to property”.¹²

Parliamentarians (from both Houses) and activists described for this study how they have been subjected to violence ranging from direct physical threats, intimidation, damage to their property, and notes slipped under their doors, to bullying and harassment by journalists, and abusive, threatening and violent comments online. For some, the abuse started when they were candidates, whilst some only experienced it after being elected. Many agreed that the volume of abuse they receive had grown in step with how well known they are. One MP reported that she saw an obvious correlation between “spikes” in the abuse she receives and her television appearances: the greater the exposure, the more vocal the perpetrators. Another parliamentarian said that, after she appears on BBC Television’s *Question Time*, she avoids social media for 24 hours and a press officer monitors her account.

PHYSICAL THREATS

In the wake of the savage murder of Jo Cox in her constituency in 2016, physical threats on MPs by their constituents are understandably cause for alarm. Cat Smith, MP, said that, during the 2017 election campaign, the windows of her campaign office were smashed, a “clear message that someone wants to hurt you”. A few days later, when the now-MP was out canvassing, a man walked into the same campaign office and told a member of staff that he was there to kill the young candidate. The first Ms Smith knew of this was a text from her member of staff telling her not to go back to the office. The CPS did not press charges.

Such threats can escalate. In October 2017, a 22-year-old man appeared in court charged with having allegedly bought a machete with the intention of killing Rosie Cooper, MP, in the name of a neo-Nazi group. The allegations are the subject of ongoing investigation.¹³ This is an extreme example. There is, nevertheless, a real concern that police and prosecutors don’t always take accusations of violent and intimidating behaviour towards candidates and parliamentarians seriously. Baroness Brinton is now a peer and president of the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems), but had previously stood for election for the Lib Dems in 2010 in Watford. In the three years leading up to that election, Baroness Brinton was subject to a campaign of stalking and harassment by one of the other political parties’ candidates, which began with the

¹² Committee on Standards in Public Life (2017). [Intimidation in Public Life](#). London: HMSO, p. 7.

¹³ *The Guardian*. [Alleged neo-Nazi appears in court charged with plotting to kill Labour MP](#), October 2017.

defacement of posters and spreading malicious literature, before escalating to damage to property. The local police finally took notice of the threat when the perpetrator slashed the tyres of a number of campaigners' cars with a very large knife. She remembers the police remarking that "the next thing will be people".

Baroness Brinton does not think that the violent behaviour should have needed to escalate to this degree before the police took the threat seriously. To date, she has not received an official apology from the political party which the candidate represented.

Physical threats of this nature are, thankfully, rare. They do, nevertheless, show how the behaviour of determined perpetrators can escalate. The MPs in this study expressed concern about the potential danger this creates for their constituency staff; indeed, many MPs have recently reviewed their walk-in policy so that members of the public can no longer walk into their office from the street. This practice should be rolled out by all MPs, and training should be made mandatory for all MPs' staff in how to assess threats against their employers and themselves. Police and prosecutors should also re-examine how seriously they treat threats against politicians.

ABUSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media have undeniably revolutionised the way in which politicians interact with their constituents as well as members of the wider public. Facebook and Twitter, at their best, engender frank political debate and remove the barrier of distance. But some of the very aspects of social media which are designed to "bring the world closer together"¹⁴ bring about abuse. Both distance and the option of anonymity mean that some individuals feel emboldened to send malicious messages and even take part in mass "spamming" of individual accounts. One parliamentarian interviewed said that entire websites exist with the sole purpose of telling its members which politician or public figure to target at any given time.

It is equally undeniable that women politicians from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities receive a disproportionate amount of abuse online. Diane Abbott, MP, drew attention to recent research conducted by Amnesty International which found that nearly half of all abusive messages sent to female MPs over a six-week period leading up to the 2017 general election were sent to her.¹⁵ Ms Abbott received 10 times more abuse than any other woman MP during this period.

¹⁴ In June 2017, Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg [announced](#) that the company's new mission statement would be "to bring the world closer together".

¹⁵ Amnesty International research found that 45.14% of abusive tweets sent in the run-up to the 2017 general election were sent to Ms Abbott. The research is discussed in *The New Statesman*, [We tracked 25,688 abusive tweets sent to women MPs – half were directed at Diane Abbott](#), 5 September 2017.

Moreover, one of the most unpalatable aspects of VAW in politics is how “normal” it has become for them to receive rape threats. One parliamentarian said: “It just happens; it happens to everyone”. A number of the women drew attention to the fact that commentators and members of the public online feel entitled to comment on how women look. “I get comments calling me an ugly bint [disparaging slang for woman or girl], saying I deserve a good raping”, said one MP. Rape threats and comments about a person’s looks are overwhelmingly aspects of abuse perpetrated against women in public life but not against men. Whilst male politicians do undoubtedly face violence of other forms (including death threats), the abuse they face is not perpetrated against them simply on account of their gender. That difference is fundamental. A male MP said, “Nobody would tweet me saying how terrible my suit was, or to tell me that I’m looking fat, or that I should dye my hair. It just wouldn’t happen”. He recognised that “women in public life are at a greater risk of being objectified”. Psychologists observe that threatening to rape a woman is seldom about sexual desire and more about power. This can hardly lessen the psychological trauma of receiving threats of this disgusting nature on a sometimes daily basis.

Not all of the abuse sent to parliamentarians online is seen by the MPs or Lords themselves since some accounts are monitored by staff. It is of paramount importance that staff are given both training in how to risk assess threats made to their employers and sufficient pastoral care for the impact which reading abusive messages can have on them.

The lack of sanctions for online abuse from both social media companies and the CPS is a cause of frustration for many MPs. As an example of this, Ms Smith recently received a rape threat in a private Facebook group, and reported it to the social media company. She was told that the message was not in “breach of Facebook’s community standards”. The MP took a screen shot of this response and posted it on Twitter, where it received a great deal of attention. Shortly afterwards, a Facebook employee got in touch, and the threat was removed from the website. She acknowledges the irony implicit in the fact that she had to use the public platform which prompted the threat in order to have it removed.

The CPS, conversely, chose not to press charges for the rape threat, owing to the fact that it was a “private matter” (they cited the fact that the Facebook group in which the threat had been posted was a private group, and only allowed people to join if they lived in the MP’s constituency). It is evident that a serious review of the ways in which the CPS assesses online threats is necessary. Pressure should also be brought to bear on social media companies to update their guidelines for dealing with malicious or threatening content. Liz Saville-Roberts, MP, draws attention to the fact that, instead of going after the perpetrators, “Twitter tells you how to hide [what you don’t want to see]. Women have to regulate [their] behaviour,” not the perpetrator. One is

put in mind of King Canute standing in front of the proverbial tide. Another parliamentarian reported that she has had to install high filters to control who can contact her on Facebook because of the level of abuse she receives.

Harry Fletcher, a prominent campaigner for victims' rights, said that "the whole system is at a crisis point when – I hope – the government will have to take proactive measures to regulate social media".

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS

The ways in which women in politics are presented in the press has an indelible impact on public attitudes. Both broadcast and print journalists help to shape the terms of democratic debate. Many will note the inconsistency in the ways in which women politicians are described as compared with their male counterparts; whilst entire columns are given over to describing what women politicians wear (the *Daily Mail* came under criticism in 2014 for reporting on new appointees to the cabinet with the headline "The Downing Street Catwalk"),¹⁶ the same tone of coverage would never be used to describe male politicians.¹⁷ Such treatment arguably trivialises women politicians in the view of the public, and opens the door to gendered and sexualised abuse.

In some instances, the behaviour of certain sections of the press can be more threatening. As part of my research for this paper, I spoke to a number of prominent former political activists, who had each accused a parliamentarian of sexual assault. Each spoke about how the intimidating behaviour of the press had an even greater emotional impact on them than the original alleged assaults. Kate Maltby, a former Conservative party activist and political commentator, faced a barrage of criticism from some newspapers after bringing allegations against a parliamentarian. One newspaper published an unauthorised, revealing out-take from a photoshoot which revealed her full figure, and allegedly contacted former partners of hers asking for compromising photographs. Ms Maltby was not the only person who told me about such behaviour from the press: Ali Goldsworthy told me that a journalist had turned up unannounced at her mother's house after an allegation she had made against a parliamentarian had been leaked to the press. Ms Goldsworthy had told the journalist to leave, but later received a voicemail message in which the same journalist threatened to investigate her sexual history and write a piece about it if she refused to cooperate with them.

¹⁶ *The Guardian*. [Daily Mail's 'Downing Street Catwalk' condemned by MPs](#), 16 July 2014.

¹⁷ The very notion of reporting on the sartorial choices of politicians' wives was satirised by a number of publications in 2016, following Theresa May's election to Prime Minister. Satirical columns focused on her husband, Philip May's, choice of suit: <http://metro.co.uk/2016/07/13/theresa-mays-husband-steals-the-show-in-sexy-navy-suit-as-he-starts-new-life-as-first-man-6005294/>.

Ms Maltby said that, for women seeking to call out allegedly sexist behaviour, “getting torn to shreds by [some newspapers] is something we just [have to] price in”: that is, it is something that is so certain to happen, it is actively predicted, and the women in question are forced to learn “how to brace for it”.

The toll which this press behaviour takes on alleged victims of assault can be devastating. Activists spoke about suffering extreme weight loss through stress, debilitating panic attacks and suicidal thoughts. Ms Maltby is convinced that some newspapers’ obsession with finding compromising photographs of women in the public eye is a form of violence, designed to intimidate them. It is hard to disagree.

Broadcast journalism also came under criticism from a number of the women interviewed for this paper. The BBC’s flagship current affairs debate programme, *Question Time*, was highlighted by a number of women as being “deliberately engineered to cause conflict” and to generate frustration and animosity from the audience. One woman in particular felt that the programme makers did not give her enough of an indication about the threats she would receive after she appeared for the first time, and took no responsibility for telling her where she should get support.

It should be noted that at least one of the women interviewed highlighted how respectful and supportive a number of journalists were when she chose to make an allegation of sexual assault. The bad behaviour which is highlighted in this paper is, of course, not true of the entire industry.

Evidently, a balance needs to be struck between stimulating frank, robust debate (which is not just welcome but necessary for a functioning democracy), and provoking distrust and vilification. One woman related how a junior producer of *Question Time* had told her, when trying to book her, that they “desperately want [a] ring-wing wom[a]n”, further suggesting that the format relies on panellists being at odds with each other from the start. Baroness Brinton spoke of her frustration at frequently being the “token woman” on panel shows: “if you are the only woman,” she said, “you need to decide whether you will spend your time myth busting” as a woman, as opposed to representing your political party. “Until more women are doing it every day”, she said, “it will keep on being a problem”.

REMEDIES

The role of political parties

The Committee on Standards in Public Life’s recent report on *Intimidation in Public Life* (2017) identifies political parties as playing a pivotal role in withstanding violent behaviour:

“Political parties are the cornerstone of democratic engagement with the political system, so they must demonstrate leadership in combatting the issue of intimidatory behaviour. They have important responsibilities towards their candidates, members and supporters.”¹⁸

The report was also resolute in its finding that to date no one party has done enough to tackle this behaviour and support alleged victims. During the course of the research for this report, a number of parliamentarians and activists reported that a great deal of the abuse they receive (particularly on social media) comes from members of other political parties. One parliamentarian expressed frustration about an incident after the Manchester bombing during the 2017 election, when one of their own party’s candidates was accused of breaking an agreed embargo on canvassing by a rival party’s supporters on Twitter. The candidate in question was attending her husband’s funeral at the time, and so could not possibly have been canvassing; but when the party got in touch with the leader of the rival party to request that this be made clear online, their request was refused.

Elections are combative, as are politics. But they need not be devoid of decency.

Another unsettling practice which a number of women highlighted was political parties’ tendency to “close ranks” when an accusation is made against one of their own parliamentarians by a member. A former activist who brought an allegation of sexual assault against a parliamentarian said it was “the loneliest thing [she’d] ever done” because a number of other parliamentarians and party officials whom she considered friends broke off contact with her. Another former activist told me that “people are conditioned to take the [mental] shortcut of thinking that good people don’t do bad things”. It would seem that, in some instances, party officials have prioritised party loyalty over providing support to alleged victims. As the aforementioned report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life makes clear:

“Those in positions of leadership within political parties should make very clear that they have a ‘not in my name’ policy for intimidatory behaviour”.¹⁹

The report welcomes the fact that a number of political parties have developed codes of conduct for dealing with allegations of abusive or violent behaviour. In building on that, the report suggests that a joint code of conduct be created so that parties can work together on these issues. A number of the parliamentarians in this study agreed that this would be a welcome move.

¹⁸ Committee on Standards in Public Life, p. 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.47

At the time when this paper was written, a report was published by a cross-party working group of MPs which recommended that complaint procedures should be established which would be independent of political parties. The recommendations of this report should clearly be considered in conjunction with those made by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

The role of parliament

In February 2018, a cross-party group of MPs published a report which looked at sexual harassment and bullying in the Palace of Westminster.²⁰ The working group was set up following a series of allegations of inappropriate behaviour against members of parliament at the end of 2017. As well as publishing a report, the working group conducted a survey of those working in the palace, which found that one in five had either experienced or witnessed inappropriate behaviour or sexual harassment in the past year.

This echoes comments made by some of the women interviewed for this report. One activist said that behaviour of this sort is “endemic” in Westminster, and warned that “you need to know that people in power do this all of the time”. The impact which inappropriate behaviour of this nature can have on parliamentarians and members of staff (both party and house staff) will evidently differ. Although the experiences of staff is strictly outside the scope of this paper, it is welcome to read the recommendations of the report, including the establishment of an independent complaints and investigation procedure, stricter sanctions and dedicated helplines. The staff who work for and alongside politicians should receive adequate support for any abuse they suffer, either at the hands of politicians, or indirectly through their intercepting abuse intended for their employers. Training should also be made widespread for staff in how to deal with violent behaviour from constituents and members of the wider public.

Few would disagree that Westminster is a peculiar place to work; it is a place imbued with tradition. The parliamentarians interviewed for this study had differing opinions as to whether change is needed in the structures of Westminster in order to make it more inclusive. Whilst some parliamentarians expressed frustration at the level of noise and bravado in the chamber (one said that a male parliamentarian used to cup imaginary breasts whenever a woman rose to speak, and another spoke of a different male parliamentarian who would bark “like a dog” to drown out a particular woman’s voice), not everyone felt the same. One parliamentarian said that “if people are talking over you, you are not making an impact”. It is, perhaps, positive to see healthy disagreement over such an issue. Ms Saville-Roberts said that achieving a balance was key: “the arena needs to be civilised but it will always be challenging.”

²⁰ *The Guardian*. [MPs and peers could be recalled or expelled for harassment](#), 8 February 2018.

Some change is, evidently, afoot. One parliamentarian pointed to the upcoming palace restoration work as an opportunity for breaking behaviour patterns: she suggested that the learned behaviour of some parliamentarians could be environmental. Another parliamentarian highlighted a positive example of how the ways in which the (government) whips operate has changed: “the whips [recently] responded to an unspecified allegation against an MP” by taking action and suspending the MP in question, whereas “years ago [the information] might have been used as leverage”. The parliamentarian in question said that “the stage has been set for improvements to take place” and also highlighted the fact that more women are in the government whips’ office now than at any time in history. It would indeed be welcome to see more such changes.

Role of police and prosecutors

This paper has already touched on the shortcomings of some police forces’ responses to allegations of violence and harassment against female parliamentarians and candidates. As one parliamentarian said, the response which parliamentarians receive to allegations of threats or violent behaviour is dependent on their relationship with the local police service, and “not all 43 constabularies will be uniformly equipped to deal with threats”. The parliamentarian questioned whether the Metropolitan Police Service should be the first port of call to deal with threats against MPs, Lords and candidates, since that is the centre of expertise.

This is not the only call that has been made for specific support to be given to politicians and candidates: in February 2018, the Prime Minister announced a review of the law relating to abuse on social media, and suggested a new offence could be introduced of intimidating candidates in elections.²¹ The reaction from parliamentarians – including some of those interviewed for this paper – has been mixed. Ms Abbott said that “abuse is terrible” regardless of who the recipient is, and that a separate offence aimed at protecting those in public life should not be the priority. Others disagreed, with one parliamentarian noting that “we can use the position of women in public life as a catalyst to getting improvements for all women”.

In the interview with the Solicitor General for this paper, he called the Prime Minister’s announcement a “timely intervention”, and that “there is a clear public interest for safeguards”. The Solicitor General felt that “we want more women to enter into public life, and where there is an issue about threats, the system has to deal with it”, although he did acknowledge that the consultation would consider the interplay with established legislation carefully – we should not, he said “clutter up the statute book too unduly”. At the time of writing, the dates of the consultation were yet to be announced.

²¹ *Financial Times*. [Theresa May orders legal review of social media behaviour](#), 5 February 2018.

A further provision announced by the Prime Minister, which is likely to be welcomed universally, is the fact that from May 2019, candidates in local elections will no longer have to publish their home addresses on ballot papers. This will correct a bizarre anomaly which was highlighted by the recent report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, as well as one of the parliamentarians interviewed. It is also likely to remove an obstacle which had been a deterrent for many women wishing to stand for election.

Regardless of whether a stand-alone offence is introduced to protect people in public life, campaigners maintain that the attitudes of police and prosecutors towards abusive behaviour should be reviewed, particularly with regard to abuse on social media. Mr Fletcher said that half of all crime is now perpetrated online, and that police do not have the resources or training to deal with the volume of evidence which these crimes can entail. Commenting on this same topic, the Solicitor General acknowledged that “we will continue to build capacity in ... training police in understanding and recognising the nature of these issues [online threats], and their ability to deal with them in an appropriate way”. He said that “we don’t have a choice – social media is with us, it’s a fact of life, and we have to find efficient ways to manage it where lines are crossed”.

As to whether the onus should be on government intervention or social media compliance, there is still a debate about whether internet service providers should be regarded as publishers (and hence liable for the material on their websites). Ms Saville-Roberts is not alone in feeling that any codes of conduct to which social media companies sign up should not simply be voluntary, whilst Angela Crawley, MP, said the companies should be compelled to issue tougher sanctions where abuse occurs. The Solicitor General noted that he has seen an improvement in the attitudes of social media companies during his time in parliament, especially the attitudes of social media executives (for example, when they have been called to give evidence). He concluded that we are “on the right road”. He spoke about the German government’s approach (compelling internet providers to act to take down content, and to impose fines where this does not happen); but the Solicitor General told me that the government is looking at enhancing existing protocols.²² The government’s preference is to encourage internet service providers to act more quickly and comprehensively to remove grossly offensive comments.

Role of society

This report has tried to make clear that there are actions which political parties, parliament, the press, police and prosecutors can take to challenge violence against

²² Shortly her interview, the Prime Minister announced that the government would soon be publishing a social media code of conduct to make social media companies more accountable.

women in politics. It has, however, been impossible to escape the fact that there is a desperate need for a wider societal conversation about the attitudes of too many people towards women in public life. One parliamentarian expressed frustration at the fact that “as soon as you are a public figure, you are fair game” and are far more likely to receive violent or intimidating comments online. Another woman, an activist, said that she had always been a feminist, but she hadn’t realised “how automatic it is that you will be greeted with hostility” when you gain a profile as a woman in public life. Regardless of the platform used to intimidate or threaten women in politics, the fact is that this happens – and the behaviour must be challenged.

A number of the parliamentarians interviewed for this study said they had at times conflicting views as to whether they should, as one parliamentarian put it, “grow a thicker hide”. They went on to say that:

“the problem ... is, if we’re growing such a thick skin that we do not have an emotional reaction [to abuse], can we empathise with constituents who would get upset about something we regard as trivial? That is a worry”.

This calls to mind the seven principles of public life (as contained in the report on *Intimidation in Public Life*) which value accountability alongside leadership: part of the bread and butter of a politician’s responsibility is to maintain a link with the people they represent.²³ It is thus surely in everybody’s interests to get to the bottom of why women in politics are routinely judged by different standards – ranging from why their looks are considered worthy of comment (sometimes even in newspapers), to why young boys are being brought up to think the way to confront a woman whose opinions they do not share is to threaten to rape them.

A former activist interviewed for this paper did not feel hopeful that societal attitudes towards women in politics would change any time soon, since “the only way women can get their stories out is by martyring themselves”, that is, by profiling themselves as victims. “That”, the activist said, “isn’t winning”. Her experience has been so traumatic that she no longer feels that party politics is the best vehicle for making a difference to people’s lives.

This paper would posit that politically engaged young women should be encouraged to feel that they can play an active part in politics without suffering abuse on account of their gender. Political parties, parliament and society at large must work together to find every necessary remedy – and enact them.

Some of the women interviewed were asked whether they felt that the abuse they receive is inevitable. One parliamentarian replied that she knew before standing that

²³ Committee on Standards in Public Life, p. 5.

“throughout history, women have suffered abuse. Every person who tries to bring about social change gets pushed back”. Baroness Brinton, meanwhile, reflected on the history of her cousin, Mary Stocks (Baroness Stocks), who was a suffragist and had worked with Marie Stopes on developing contraception: “We have always had leaders like that who have done it ... they were doing some very uncomfortable things and they got abused for it”. She went on to say that:

“It is true of society generally that if you are going to be taking a different course from the received wisdom ... then you are likely to be putting yourself in a position where you are going to be fired at Women have often been the target of that ... the battles will change but they will probably be there constantly”.

As the report on *Intimidation in Public Life* makes clear, the cost to democracy of not fighting these battles is too high.²⁴ The majority of those interviewed agreed that, alongside any legislative changes or growth in prosecutions against violent behaviour, society should unite behind a concerted effort to improve education about equality and the role of women.

It will, to a certain extent, be a question of time for attitudes to change and assumptions to be challenged; but there are still structural changes which can be made to the ways in which women experience political life. Writing at the beginning of 2018, and in the context of widespread allegations of sexual abuse not just in Westminster but in industries from the arts to Hollywood, it is tempting to hope that this truly is a “watershed” moment in political history.²⁵ As one former activist said, it is necessary to create environments where abuse does not happen – not simply deal with the consequences of those abuses that do occur. Treating women unfavourably because of their gender should be unacceptable, and this should be as true in the press, on social media and in real life.

Finally, a word on political representation. This paper was completed in the same week that marked the centenary of the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1918. The most effective way of altering the experiences of women in politics is by ensuring that more women enter political life. Being in the rooms where decisions are made matters. Political parties and parliament should take every action to make political life a more appealing prospect for women from all communities and backgrounds. Until more women are elected to public office, society is unlikely to see the wholesale change which is necessary.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.46

²⁵ Committee on Standards in Public Life, p. 7.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Political parties

- Political parties should work together to agree and adopt a joint code of conduct for candidates, officials, members and politicians (as recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life), and sanctions should be brought to bear for any persons who fall foul of that code.
- Political parties should expose abuse regardless of who is the perpetrator. Party loyalty should never be prized more highly than uncovering the truth, or supporting those who bring allegations.
- Political parties should take every action to make political life a more appealing prospect for women from all communities and backgrounds.

Parliament

- Training should be given to all parliamentary staff in how to risk assess threats made to their employers, and support should be made readily available for staff who have to deal with abuse themselves (whether directly or indirectly).
- All Members of Parliament should be encouraged to review “walk-in” policies pertaining to their constituency offices.

Government

- The government should encourage internet service providers to act more quickly to remove offensive comments, regardless of who is the target of that abuse.
- Thought should be given as to whether the UK should adopt the German model of compelling social media companies to act to take down grossly offensive content, and to impose fines where this does not happen.
- Subject to the outcome of the recently announced consultation, thought should be given as to whether an offence should be created of intimidating persons in public life.

Police and prosecutors

- Training should be given to police and prosecutors in how to deal with allegations of abuse by women in public life, and resources should be made available to help with evidence gathering.

- Thought should be given as to whether the Metropolitan Police Service should be the first port of call to deal with threats against MPs, Lords, and election candidates.
- Candidates for election should never be compelled to publish their home address on ballot papers.

Social media companies

- Social media companies should update their guidelines for dealing with malicious or threatening content, and should not treat threats made in “private” groups less seriously than those made on public forums.
- Social media companies should comply with any social media codes of conduct published by the UK government.

The press

- The UK press should consider the impact which their coverage of women in public life has on public attitudes, particularly in relation to sexualised content.
- Programme makers should consider giving guidance to women in public life who appear on their programmes as to how to deal with abusive comments perpetrated online.

Society

- A frank public conversation should take place about the ways in which attitudes to women in public life are shaped by press coverage, a lack of education, as well as other factors.
- Society should unite behind a concerted effort to improve education about equality and the role of women.