

Scottish Women's Convention Response to:

The United Kingdom Government's Committee on Standards in Public Life Call for Evidence: "Intimidation Experienced by Parliamentary Candidates" August 2017

The Consultation

The UK Government public body, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, is undertaking a review of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates, including those who stood at the 2017 General Election. Other issues of consideration include the broader implications for other candidates for public office and other public office holders.

The purpose of the review is to examine the nature of the problem of intimidation and consider whether current measures are satisfactory to address such behaviour, especially given the rise of social media and how enforceable these measures are. The review will recognise the important role of legitimate scrutiny of those standing for public office by the public and the press.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The SWC has been consulting with women on issues which are important to them around politics with much focus on female representation and the highly gendered nature of violence elicited at women within the political world. This has included much emphasis on the rise of social media as a powerful factor in decimating this abuse.

The SWC believes that a strong gender focus is necessary when considering the impact of intimidation of parliamentary candidates. Many of the legislative and policy decisions designed to eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) are not implemented when it comes to the likes of social media. There are, therefore, real concerns around the nature of these threats.

Question 1:

What is the nature and degree of intimidation experienced by Parliamentary candidates, in particular at the 2017 General Election?

Intimidation or abuse, particularly levelled at women, has seen an exponential increase, heightened even more by the intensity and divisive nature of the most recent General Election. Whilst this has been the case for a number of years due to a range of issues, a huge factor this time around is the move to online harassment and hatred. The increasing access to technology is even more pervasive now than during the 2015 election campaign. It has led to abuse being able to ferment much more easily.

This has been compounded lately by the “*Brexit effect*”. Negative comments that are completely unfounded are aimed at politicians for no reason other than for their beliefs concerning the European Union.

Abuse, whether online or physical, does not just effect Parliamentary candidates, but also family, friends, their employees and volunteers. This is most often carried out in an intimidating manner.

Failure to tackle intimidation and abuse seeks to normalise it and can often escalate and encourage people to potentially carry out physical threats. There is a feeling throughout society that online abuse is not treated severely simply because it is not face to face.

“Social media can be the worst. People go over the top and start arguments for the sake of it. It tends to be more political.”

“These sites aren’t monitored appropriately and are easy targets for exploitation of women and children.”

The amount of women in public office, whilst still far from representative, has gained in number over the years. There has also been an increase of women in more prominent political positions such as party leaders and ministers. Whilst this is to be commended, profile-raising often leads to a sharp rise in specifically highly-gendered abuse.

“Just because someone is well-known, doesn’t mean they won’t get targetted for being a woman.”

Question 2:

Does the issue of the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates reflect a wider change in the relationship and discourse between public office holders and the public?

There have been a number of elections and referendums over the past few years which have led to an intensification of political opinions by society in general. This can often be stoked by politician’s own violent rhetoric and exacerbated intensely online.

Engagement between public officials and the public has been undergoing change for a number of years. This can be viewed positively as a direct result of digitalisation and increasing representation of minorities as public representatives. Whilst these steps forward in equality are to be applauded, it has led to a high rise in not just abuse, but also in the hostile nature of this, with threats being highly targeted towards women.

Question 3:

Has the media or social media significantly changed the nature, scale, or effect of intimidation of Parliamentary candidates? If so, what measures would you suggest to help address these issues?

The increasing accessibility to public figures through the likes of social media and digitalisation has led to a blurring of boundaries over what can be considered acceptable and what cannot. A huge amount of the abuse directed at female parliamentary candidates in particular is highly sexualised and dangerous. Not only does this put these women in fear of their lives but can also encourage others to emulate the perpetrators.

This is a particular problem in terms of the sexual abuse received by many female politicians merely because of their gender. Social media has the added effect that many people find others who not just perpetrate, but also intensify, intimidation and abuse. This has conspired to normalise abuse against women and see things such as rape threats as commonplace.

“If you wouldn’t threaten rape in real life, then why can you do it online?”

The media in general however must also face tighter controls. Tougher guidelines should be established over what can be seen as fuelling intimidating behaviour through the likes of political journalism. It must be recognised by media outlets that there is a fine line between political debate and instigating reckless behaviour in individuals towards electoral candidates.

Within this priority, greater emphasis should be placed on the media’s role in tackling gender inequality. Given the influence that this outlet plays in our society, the Government should use its position to influence what is being portrayed and issuing codes of conduct, particularly around women and minority groups. Failure to advocate the high level of responsibility that the media plays can lead to promulgation of VAWG at a wider level in society. It should be recognised that the media has an obligation to promote the value of having females in such high positions.

“The media in general presents a really distorted view of women in power.”

Question 4:

Is existing legislation sufficient to address intimidation of Parliamentary candidates?

At present, many perpetrators of abuse and intimidation can often be overlooked due to the limitations of current legislation. More convictions and harsher sentences would make clear to those who commit these offences that they will not “get off lightly”.

Current legislation under both UK and Scottish law is insufficient to deal with abuse, as proven by the exponential rise in intimidation in the latest election campaign. For example, as stated above, highly gendered abuse can be seen as VAWG, a fundamental human rights issue, and should be dealt with as such. At present, this does not occur in the majority of cases against public officials.

The Offences (Aggravation by Prejudice) (Scotland) Bill, 2009, for example, enacts a statutory aggravator for what it defines as hate crime misdemeanours committed against those with a disability, sexual orientation or transgender identity. This is illustrative of the high degree achieved within Scotland of safeguarding those with protected characteristics.

However, the enactment of women as a specific group which can experience discrimination is lacking at both a Scottish and UK Government level. Women should be recognised as a protected characteristic within hate crime legislation. This would enable female candidates to challenge intimidation in respect of their gender.

“This issue is so important. The only way to ensure women have access to justice, support and most importantly safety, is by putting laws in place which punish those who carry out this behaviour.”

Question 5:

What role should political parties play in preventing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates and encouraging constructive debate?

Political parties should take a leading role in discouraging abuse. This should include forced expulsion from said party if a member is found to have carried out this behaviour, whether online or in person.

The effect of political parties themselves on these problems cannot be downplayed and should be held to account. This year has seen an ever increasing number of online marketing strategies deployed across social media by all parties targeting opponents in more and more vitriolic ways and playing on fears by the public. These forms of marketing should be regulated and held to account more rigorously than at present. In being allowed to continue in this vein, it promulgates and encourages individuals to attack politicians over sensationalist and exaggerated claims. Political parties should be cautious for their –albeit unknowing – role in this. Campaigns which targeted specific politicians on the other side have led to a barrage of abuse.

Furthermore, the majority of political parties throughout the UK do not hold a social media policy for their members. These should be established and should include specific references to crimes committed involving abuse against women, race, disability, etc.

Question 6:

What other measures might be effective in addressing the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates, and candidates for public offices more broadly?

What is of particular growing importance concerning intimidation of public figures is not just the barrage of abuse encountered but the nature that this takes, often being overwhelmingly violent and sexist. This must be recognised more widely and acknowledged if it is to be prevented. Considering this, preventative measures should be tailored more effectively towards women, both online and off.

It should also be recognised the role of social media in planning and orchestrating acts of intimidation against anyone, including public officials. This could entail setting out social media legislation under specific guidelines to emphasise the seriousness of online threats. For instance, there is no specific legislation around “cyber stalking” or online harassment, making it hard to convict even if the perpetrator is known.

Whilst tougher legislation is vital in deterring intimidation, other solutions must be sought in order to tackle this fundamental problem outright. A revised and inclusive approach to abuse both online and in person should be conceived by the government. This must target the public from a young age in order to highlight and underline the dangers of this. The SWC has found that there is very little education around online trolling and abuse.

“I think teaching kids to recognise the peril of social media is useful. Even if it’s just communicating to them ‘it’s wrong’ can be a great thing. It means they can internalise it and there’s less chance they’ll go on to carry it out themselves or be influenced by it when they grow up.”

Failure to acknowledge and include a specific framework for this lacks perceiving how different aspects of abuse affect different groups within society. A specific priority devoted to diversifying and improving quality education and legislation is sorely needed.

Furthermore, women have commented about the lack of responsibility social media organisations take in tackling online abuse, often doing nothing at all or merely suspending the perpetrator’s account for a few days. Stricter guidelines around these organisations and their social responsibility should be enacted and be put into law.

Question 7:

Could the experience of intimidation by Parliamentary candidates discourage people from standing for elected or appointed public offices?

Upon consultation with women, a main point that came across in terms of political life was their portrayal as electoral candidates or representatives in general. Many women noted that this is a key feature turning off participation for women, especially younger ones.

“Women have to act tough in order to be a woman in a man’s world still, plain and simple.”

Aside from this, many candidates are so intimidated by abuse that they have received that they are fearful to even come forward and report it for fear of repercussions, not just from perpetrators, but from others who may seek to copy these threats.

“I think a lot of people forget how hard it is now. Everything happens so fast. Everything is online and accessible. It can be really scary and intimidating, especially to young women.”

If the issue of abuse and intimidation is not tackled through a gendered lens and recognised for the real harm it causes to women, more and more will be discouraged from running and put encouraging equal representation in politics at real risk.

Question 8:

Has the intimidation of Parliamentary candidates led to a change in the way in which public office holders interact with the public in correspondence, on social media, or at in-person events?

The media is seen as playing a huge role in treatment of candidates. Often encouraging bitter rivalries between female politicians themselves and continuing to portray them in terms of appearance rather than ability. This was seen to have a huge effect on how female politicians acted as well as encouraging abuse and intimidating behaviour by males.

More should be done to combat this stereotype. And whilst it was acknowledged that the tide is slowly changing, it was noted that more recently there seems to be a regression back to these tactics rather than moving forward.

“It’s a negative that women in power are just as adversarial as men”

What is worrying is that if this intimidation remains unchecked, that vital parts of our democratic system such as political surgeries and openness with politicians will be lost due to fear.

Elected representatives are to be commended for the way in which they have handled themselves despite the abuse they have faced. Worryingly, those that are elected may not want to progress further for fear that a higher profile might mean more instances of abuse being targeted at them.

Conclusion

The SWC welcomes and fully supports the Committee's Review into the intimidation of parliamentary candidates. The highly gendered and sexualised form that abuse can take when directed at these representatives both online and in person is a pressing issue that urgently needs addressing.

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The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to political representation.

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