

MEASURES TO MITIGATE AGAINST RISING LEVELS OF ONLINE ABUSE

With a marked increase in the level of threatening and abusive social media posts and 'hate mail' against female members of the Oireachtas and female councillors in recent times, what measures are in place to help mitigate the effects of such abuse? Report by Deirdre O'Flynn.

A study by NUI Galway in 2020 indicated that almost all (96%) of the interviewees – current and former female members of the Oireachtas, as well as female councillors from all major political parties – had received social media or email messages that used threatening language or 'hate mail'.

Three-quarters had been threatened with physical violence via online or social media. Almost two in five reported they had been threatened with sexual violence, with a quarter saying they had been verbally abused in public.

Other respondents admitted to receiving threatening and abusive phone calls at home and on their mobile phone; being worried about their family's safety due to threats on social media; not feeling comfortable attending large public meetings alone; having considered quitting politics because of the abuse received.

"We know that women in public life are regularly subjected to unrelenting abuse, particularly online. This abuse is used to silence women and to prevent their participation in politics and public life," according to Orla O'Connor, Director of the National Women's Council.

"Women from minority and marginalised backgrounds are often subject to not only sexist and misogynistic abuse online, but racism and homophobia too. Online abuse acts as a barrier for many women who wish to enter public service, but do not run for office or put themselves forward out of fear of abuse," O'Connor added.

MORE ABUSIVE TWEETS

Recent research by data scientist Dr Ian Richardson revealed that female local councillors received eight times as many abusive tweets per followers compared to their male counterparts; female Senators received three times as many abusive tweets per followers than their male counterparts. Interestingly, the research found no



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significant difference between the number of abusive tweets female TDs received compared to their male counterparts.

This latter point is of cold comfort to TD Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. In May this year, she read her victim impact statement in court during the sentence hearing of a man who sent her three sexually explicit videos and messages in early 2020.

Receiving the videos and other messages during a General Election campaign made her fearful, she told the court: "When you are running an election, the key objective is to physically meet people. I was afraid for the first time."

So, in the face of increasing abuse – and with increasing numbers of female politicians going public about the abuse – are there any initiatives in place to help mitigate the effects of abuse?

'SHE' EMPOWERS RURAL WOMEN

Dr Michelle Maher is Programme Manager of the 'See Her Elected' (SHE) programme, the overall aim of which is to empower women in rural constituencies to engage in local electoral politics.

"Our model is hands on and practical in supporting women into politics and to make women feel they can run for politics



“***The National Women’s Council (NWC) Social Media Toolkit claims that Irish political parties are not doing enough when it comes to supporting women who are subject to online abuse and threats and must take substantial action to better support women candidates.***”

again,” she told ‘Council Review’. Fully funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage, SHE runs workshops for aspiring female local politicians which includes laying the groundwork for participation in the 2024 Local Elections.

Part of this strategy preparation includes having “a social media strategy, setting social media goals, understanding analytics, and how to protect themselves”.

As the workshop participants put their campaigns together to raise their profile in 2023, SHE will build in “digital self-defence and digital self-care ... it’s about helping them to mitigate what’s happening online and how to deal with it”.

The workshops run alongside SHE’s publication, ‘A Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections’, which aims to be a practical, user-friendly guide for women who are considering running in the 2024 Local Elections, and for those women who would like to be involved in an election campaign to see other women elected in their area.

In May, SHE collaborated with Clare County Council to run a seminar, ‘Promoting Gender Equality & Diversity in Local Government’, aimed at supporting greater involvement by women from diverse backgrounds in local government

(details on this event are on pages 25 & 27). The ‘SHE’ initiative also gained international recognition for its work by winning a European Innovation in Politics Award in the Democracy Category in December 2021.

Political parties have a huge role to play when a female politician is targeted, said Maher. “The political party needs to say, ‘We believe her, we stand by her, and they need to correct misinformation. If one is targeted, they should all – male and female – stand up in the council and say, ‘We’re not standing for it”.

AILG’S CRIME MANAGEMENT STUDY

In 2021, a study by the Association of Irish Local Government (AILG) and the Crime Management Group (CMG) showed that 48% of respondents had considered or were considering leaving their role due to the level of threats and harassment. Almost three-quarters of respondents (71%) said they were not prepared or only moderately prepared for handling the threats, harassment, and intimidation they experienced.

In response to the survey, the first training module of AILG’s 2022 Training Programme, “Elected Members Personal Safety and Risk Assessment”, focused on areas including location and non-location specific risks, the security implications of social media/social networks, ensuring a safe environment, and how elected councillors can audit their digital footprint.

“Location risks include both the home and the clinic, and the social media implications of what information is put online in terms of a stalking risk,” said Cllr Nicholas Crossan, AILG President.

In June, an online training webinar in collaboration with



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Facebook will inform councillors about the safety policies currently in place on Facebook and Instagram and outline how elected members can use tools to protect their personal/business page.

NEW ONLINE SAFETY LEGISLATION

The new Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill will also be useful in policing damaging online content, said Crossan. Amongst other things, the Bill will establish a new regulator, with an Online Safety Commissioner appointed to a new Media Commission.

The Media Commission will replace the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and be responsible for overseeing updated regulations for broadcasting and video on-demand services and the new regulatory framework for online safety created by the Bill.

“It is vitally important to ensure councillors understand the fundamentals of personal security awareness and the risks associated with their digital footprint, so they are able to recognise and be better prepared for threats, and occurrences of harassment and intimidation,” noted the AILG President.

RISE OF WOMEN’S CAUCUSES

Women’s caucuses for female elected councillors are also a useful tool, as they provide an opportunity for female councillors to network and support each other.

“This is becoming increasingly important as abuse and harassment will not only act as a deterrent and hold people back from running for future election but could also affect retention rates, with many local public representatives already choosing not to re-run for the next local election (predominantly women councillors),” according to the AILG.

Social media providers will also have to step up to the mark. The AILG believes it is crucial to see more effective liaison between local authorities, political parties, councillors, and social media providers so that it is clear what interventions providers can provide by way when threats are made on their platforms.

SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLKIT

Indeed, a National Women’s Council (NWC) Social Media Toolkit, developed by Valesca Lima and Claire McGing, argues that Irish political parties are not doing enough when it comes to supporting women who are subject to online abuse and threats and must take substantial action to better support women candidates.



Dr Michelle Maher, SHE’s programme manager, pictured at the launch of ‘A Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections’ at Longford Women’s Link in November 2021, with her co-authors Mairead O’Shea, SHE’s Communications Manager, and Public Affairs Consultant, Kathleen O’Meara.

“Political parties have a key role to play in supporting and protecting the women who do come forward for election and have a duty of care to candidates before, during, and after an election period,” said NWC Director Orla O’Connor.

The Social Media Toolkit, designed by the NWC to help tackle violence against women in politics (VAWIP), details a clear pathway of actions for Irish political parties. “Our proposals include funding of equality officer roles at constituency and branch level and the provision of designated training to named contact persons within the party for those who need to report an incident,” said Rachel Coyle, NWC Head of Campaigns and Mobilisation.

JOINT CODE ON POLITICAL CONDUCT

“We also call on political parties to develop an online anonymous reporting tool that all party members can use and offer mental health services to survivors of violence against women in politics.”

The toolkit also recommends that political parties create a Joint Code on Political Conduct. This outlines the minimum standards of behaviour expected from all party members and that parties should actively and continuously engage with the Oireachtas Women’s Caucus and members of caucuses at local government level to tackle violence against women in politics.

Such proactivity is important within a national context to correct a gender imbalance in politics where 78% of TDs and 76% of councillors are still male, according to the SHE Programme Manager.

The following resources are available:

- ‘A Guide to Running in the 2024 Local Elections’ is free to download <https://www.seeherelected.ie/booklet-a-guide-to-running-in-the-2024-local-elections/>
- Training and education resources from the AILG <http://ailg.ie/training-education/>
- Toolkit on Social Media Policies for Political Parties (National Women’s Council) https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Toolkit_SocialMediaAbuse_2022FINAL.pdf