UK Parliament   GL!TCH   COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION UK

JULY 2021

CPA UK's Women Parliamentarians Roadshow:

A Guide to Addressing Online Abuse

Introduction

All across the Commonwealth, democracy has gone digital. From the use of Twitter accounts by UK MPs to WhatsApp groups for constituents in Sierra Leone, social media platforms are now a vital aid to parliamentarians carrying out their duties.

Such use of technology has allowed representatives to easily communicate their work, and gives constituents the opportunity to voice their concerns directly. This was particularly true during the Covid-19 pandemic where MPs could no longer hold surgeries under social distancing rules. This unrestricted access through social media has, however, led to a surge in online abuse and harassment, largely targeted at women MPs.

42% of women MPs interviewed globally said they had been a target of abusive, sexual or violent content and behaviour on social media.

❝ Online abuse is silencing the important voices of women representatives in our democracies ❞

An Inter-Parliamentary Union study into harassment of women parliamentarians found that 42% of women MPs interviewed globally said they had been a target of abusive, sexual or violent content and behaviour on social media. CPA UK research has found that women parliamentarians have received abuse online in the form of abusive and discriminatory language, as well as threats of physical or sexual violence. In many cases, CPA UK found that these experiences have changed how parliamentarians communicate online, with many women MPs either reducing or no longer using a particular platform. Online abuse is silencing the important voices of women representatives in our democracies.

About CPA UK's Women's Roadshows

In response to this growing issue, CPA UK hosted three virtual workshops in July 2021. Held regionally, parliamentarians from 20 Commonwealth legislatures came together to share their experience of digital spaces as women in politics.

Facilitated by Glitch – a UK charity working to end online abuse – and communications consultancy BeSpoke Skills, the three-hour workshop took participants through how to stay safe online as well as how women parliamentarians can present with impact.

These workshops aimed to provide parliamentarians with a safe platform to discuss the use of social media as part of their roles, and share techniques in building resilience against online abuse.

About this Guide

This document serves as a practical guide to tackling online abuse and includes many of the techniques developed and shared by Glitch and BeSpoke Skills during the regional Roadshows.

From trolling, to doxing, to cyber-bullying, this handbook covers top practical tips for women parliamentarians in protecting themselves and colleagues against various forms of online abuse. This includes how best to defend yourself and support others online, how to preserve your well-being and how to become more influential through assertive communication.

CPA UK hopes this guide will act as a practical resource for members to refer to when developing their strategies and digital defence skills, and approaches to managing online communications.

Protecting yourself online: Glitch's Tips for Digital Self-Defence

Staying safe on social media

Keep your personal and professional media accounts separate

Keep in the know with changes to the security updates of social media sites

Keep your location hidden. Some social media sites include features that automatically track your live location. Make sure these are turned off in your settings.

> **66 Our Parliament is taking action by creating a Code of Conduct, to define what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and to help create a culture where all of us feel empowered to stand up and name thingsas unacceptable 99**

Jan Logie MP, Parliament of New Zealand

Taking care of you and your team: Managing your well-being

Creating online boundaries

Social media is a powerful tool for parliamentarians to increase their engagement with constituents, and converse directly on the issues most concerning those they represent. This however does not mean that online abuse is a part of the job. Women parliamentarians must ensure social media is a positive and effective tool for digital democracy. For this, they should establish boundaries and set clear guidelines on what is and is not acceptable on their pages.

This can be done in several ways:

Create a 'page policy' – This should explain the purpose of your page (such as to promote events in your constituency) and also specify what you do and do not use your page for. If you have a separate process for casework, for example, providing a direct email address will mean constituents can get to the right place, rather than express any frustration at not having their issue resolved on your page. Your policy could also explain what you will and won't engage with on your page, such as offensive language, and the consequences of such behaviour such as being blocked. For your page policy to be effective, it should be 'pinned' at the top of your page and the first thing visitors see.

Use your online defences and train your team – you do not need to engage with abusive people online. Block and report those harassing you.

Limit your time online – Parliamentarians cannot be expected to be online and accessible at all times. It is therefore important to set aside time for yourself and your team to sometimes step away for a moment or to pass on social media responsibilities to a colleague if they're handling particularly harmful online abuse.

Building online alliances: How to support women parliamentarians across the Commonwealth

With growing reports of online harassment across the Commonwealth, it is becoming more crucial that women MPs are equipped with the best methods to support one another. One such way is by becoming an online active bystander and being an uplifting voice to anyone on the receiving end of abuse.

Glitches' tips on how to be an active bystander:

> **We need to continue coming together and supporting efforts that stop online abuse by sharing ideas and solutions.**
>
> Minister Laura Ross, Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Report any abuse, and the abuser, to the social media platform

Reply to the original post or the abusive post by bringing the discussion back to the initial purpose

Send an encouraging message to your colleague

Encourage your colleague to document and report the abusive interaction

Share tips and techniques on how best to protect yourself online

Many legislatures across the Commonwealth have networks established for women parliamentarians, such as women's caucuses. Through such groups, members can provide cross-party support on the common challenges they face as women in politics. Beyond enacting gender-sensitive policy, women's parliamentary forums are vital for sharing concerns and creating solutions, particularly in those legislatures where women are a minority.

> **I pledge to support this cause [of tackling online abuse] and with other women parliamentarians across the world, join together to create that safe space for us to work together and come up with appropriate legislation to protect us, our rights and allow us to do our duty**
>
> Hon. Teenha Jutton MNA, Mauritius National Assembly

Assertiveness in Politics

Gender biases mean that women are stereotyped as passive and submissive and men are considered natural leaders – assertive and strong. Women parliamentarians are working against this every day simply by existing in politics. Clear, confident and controlled communication is key to holding influence and demonstrating political assertiveness. This is even more true for women politicians challenging stereotypes.

Below are the key tips shared with participants on communicating assertively in politics:

Assertiveness is the ability to convince others to your point of view to gain acceptance, support and commitment.

Know your mission, remember your why: reminding yourself of your success as a representative and the importance of your role.

Making your message clear: knowing what you are trying to convey and being clear in your words provides others with clarity.

Body language: stand tall. Whilst delivering a speech in parliament for example, an assertive stance can be demonstrated by giving eye contact to those listening. Use hand gestures to further engage your audience. Changes to your tone and the use of pauses in your speech can also help emphasise your message.

Know your rights: you have the right to create your own boundaries and being passive on this allows others to also disregard them. Block and report unacceptable behaviour online and disengage from it in real life.

Take a STOPP approach: when conveying your message Stop, Take a breath, Observe your audience, Put the situation into perspective, Practise the techniques above and Proceed. Be clear in your message, communicate your boundaries, have a plan to deliver your message and know your rights.

Next Steps

Through our focus on parliamentary strengthening, CPA UK is committed to empowering Women in Parliament. During the workshop discussions, participants committed to taking action in their legislatures including sharing the techniques with colleagues, raising public awareness on the issue of online abuse and establishing a network for women parliamentarians to discuss common challenges.

CPA UK will continue to engage Commonwealth women parliamentarians on the issue of online abuse as well as wider issues specifically impacting women representatives.

Acknowledgements

CPA UK would like to thank Glitch and BeSpoke skills for their support in facilitating this round of workshops and in the creation of this resource.

For more practical tips and resources, please read Glitch's <u>Digital Threats to Democracy Resource</u> or access their website <u>here</u>.

Useful Resources

<u>1Password Password Manager</u>
<u>Keeper Security Password Manager</u>
<u>Yoti Identity Platform</u>
<u>Glitch Form for Documenting Online Abuse</u>
<u>Glitch Digital Resilience Action Plan</u>
<u>Glitch resources</u>
<u>Women's Media Centre – Online Abuse 101</u>

Americas, Caribbean and Europe Region:

<u>Glitch</u>
<u>Report Harmful Content UK</u>
<u>HeartMob</u>
<u>No! to Online Abuse and Harassment Barbados</u>

Asia-Pacific Region:

<u>Centre for Cyber Victim Counselling India</u>
<u>IT for Change</u>
<u>The Online Hate Prevention Institute Australia</u>
<u>eSafety Commissioner Australia</u>
<u>International Organization of Journalists, Byte Back Campaign</u>
<u>Gender IT</u>

Africa Region:

<u>The Initiative for Equal Rights Nigeria</u>
<u>Take Back The Tech</u>
<u>Troll Busters</u>
<u>Maru South Africa</u>