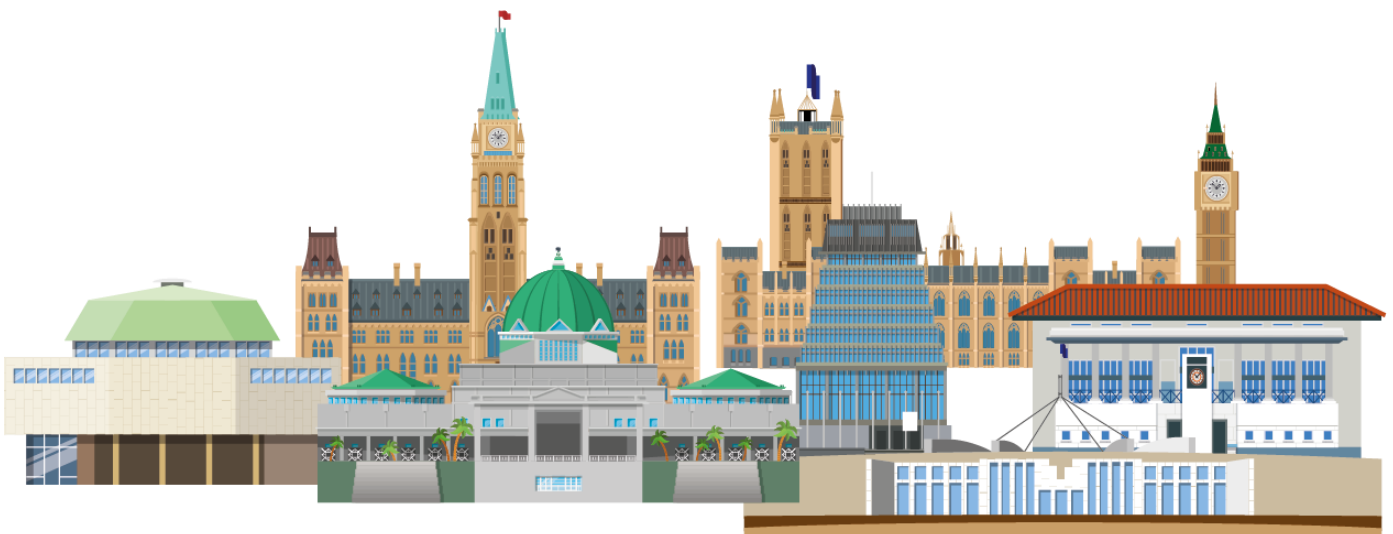# 68TH COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

'Debate not hate': Not accepting abuse as an outcome of free speech

CWP WORKSHOP RESEARCH BRIEFING

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Contents

Executive Summary

This report examines the escalating threat of technology-facilitated abuse and violence against women Parliamentarians, arguing that this phenomenon is not merely a personal issue but a systemic challenge to democratic integrity and equitable political participation. The analysis, grounded in recent studies from the last five years, reveals that women in public office across both developed and developing Commonwealth countries are disproportionately targeted by a spectrum of digital harms, including doxing, cyberstalking, and the particularly malicious use of AI-generated deepfakes.

A significant barrier to a coordinated global response is the lack of a common, harmonised definition for these abuses, which hinders effective data collection and creates legislative ambiguity. Furthermore, the rise of deepfake technology introduces a new threat: the "liar's dividend," where public figures can falsely dismiss genuine, compromising content as fabricated, thereby undermining accountability and the very concept of an objective public record.

The psychological and social impacts on women politicians are severe, leading to profound personal distress and a documented "gendered chilling effect" that silences women's voices and deters future generations from entering politics. The problem is exacerbated by a failure of institutional systems, including inconsistent responses from law enforcement and the ineffectiveness of social media platform regulations.

Based on this analysis, the report recommends a multi-pronged strategy. This includes the urgent reform of legislative frameworks to create specific laws addressing political violence against women; the establishment of survivor-centered parliamentary support systems; and the implementation of robust digital security training for elected officials. It is imperative that Parliamentarians, both male and female, recognise this issue as a threat to national security and representative democracy, and commit to a holistic, integrated, and intersectional approach to combat its root causes.

1. Introduction: A New Frontier of Violence

The rapid proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT), significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has transformed the landscape of political engagement. It has enabled direct communication between elected officials and their constituents, fostering a new era of digital democracy. However, this same technological advancement has opened a new and dangerous frontier for gender-based violence, a phenomenon that disproportionately targets women in public life.[1] This report synthesises research from the last five years to provide a comprehensive analysis of this threat, its impacts, and the strategies necessary for Parliamentarians to combat it.

1.1 Defining the Digital Battlefield

A fundamental challenge in addressing technology-facilitated violence is the absence of a common, global definition, a gap repeatedly identified by international bodies such as UN Women and the Commonwealth Secretariat.[3] For the purposes of this report, technology-facilitated abuse and violence against women (TFVAW) is defined as any act of gender-based violence that is "committed, assisted, aggravated, and amplified in part or fully" by technology.[5] This is not a new form of violence but rather an extension of offline gender-based violence that uses digital tools to inflict harm.[5] The range of harmful behaviours includes, but is not limited to, online harassment, cyberstalking, threats of

physical and sexual violence, doxing (the non-consensual publication of personal data), and the sharing of non-consensual intimate imagery.[5]

One of the most insidious and rapidly evolving forms of TFVAW is the use of deepfakes.[10] Deepfakes are AI-generated videos, images, or audio that are highly realistic but entirely fabricated, often used to create demeaning and sexualised content of individuals.[11] A new study by The American Sunlight Project reveals the stark gender disparity in the use of this technology: of 26 members of the U.S. Congress who were victims of non-consensual intimate imagery, 25 were women.[12] This data confirms a deeply troubling trend that the overwhelming majority of deepfake imagery depicts women, including politicians and journalists.[10]

The emergence of deepfakes poses a dual threat to democracy. While they can be used to fabricate and spread disinformation, they can also be weaponised to discredit genuine information. This dynamic is known as the "liar's dividend".[11] It is a phenomenon where public figures, who are more aware of the public's concern about deepfakes, can falsely claim that legitimate, compromising audio or video content is, in fact, an AI-generated fabrication.[11] This strategy allows them to evade accountability for their real actions or statements, thereby eroding the epistemic foundations of a functioning democracy. For Parliamentarians, this presents a significant challenge: not only must they combat the dissemination of false information, but they must also contend with the erosion of public trust in authentic media, which undermines the very concept of an objective public record.[11]

2. The Disproportionate Impact on Women Parliamentarians

The impact of technology-facilitated violence on women Parliamentarians is severe and multi-dimensional, affecting their personal well-being, their professional lives, and the integrity of democratic systems as a whole.

2.1 Psychological and Social Harms

The consequences of technology-facilitated online abuse are extensive, affecting women who are currently in office and discouraging future generations from entering politics. The harassment is not just a personal issue; it has a systemic impact on democratic representation. For women who are currently serving in politics, the abuse takes a

significant psychological and professional toll. Female MPs have reported experiencing severe psychological distress, including fear for their personal safety and that of their families.[14] One study found that 75% of women who experienced online harassment in New Zealand had trouble sleeping, while nearly three-quarters (72%) were less able to focus on everyday tasks.[14] The abuse is often described as "relentless," with some MPs noting that they face a constant stream of misogynistic and racist comments and death threats on every post they make.[15] This psychological harm is compounded by the fact that their concerns are sometimes minimised by authorities when they attempt to report threats.[15]

Professionally, the abuse forces women to change their behaviour and limits their political effectiveness. Many Parliamentarians either reduce their use of social media or stop using platforms entirely, which restricts their ability to communicate with constituents and participate in modern political discourse.[1] Online harassment also makes it more difficult for women to get elected, as they may feel compelled to alter their campaign strategies to avoid threatening situations.[16] Research shows that women MPs are 12 percentage points more likely than their male counterparts to be silenced by violence.[17] This can lead them to draw back from policy debates or self-censor their views, which harms the representation of the very voters who elected them.[17] The violence also imposes a financial cost, with some Canadian MPs having to install panic buttons and security cameras or hire private consultants to ensure their safety.[18]

Table 1: Types of Technology-Facilitated Abuse and their Real-World Impacts

Type of Abuse	Description	Psychological Impact	Social/Physical Impact
Doxing [9]	Publishing personal details online (home address, phone number).	Fear for personal safety; anxiety; stress.	Offline attacks; stalking; blackmail.
Deepfakes [12]	AI-generated non-consensual intimate imagery.	Psychological trauma; humiliation; shame.	Threats to privacy; social ostracisation; professional harm.

Cyberstalking [9]	Tracking and harassing a person online using technology.	Fear and terror; constant state of hyper-vigilance.	Physical attacks; coercive control; restricted freedom.
Threats of Gendered Violence [9]	Threats of rape, assault, or death.	Severe fear for safety of self and family; distress.	Escalation to offline violence; need for security measures.

2.2 A Threat to Democratic Participation: The "Gendered Chilling Effect"

The most profound systemic impact of TFVAW is the "gendered chilling effect," which actively deters women from seeking or retaining positions of power.[2] The pervasive threat of online violence dissuades others from entering politics, thereby undermining democracy.[20] Research by the American Sunlight Project found that 41% of women aged 18 to 29 self-censor online to avoid harassment, highlighting a significant threat to free speech and democratic participation.[12] The consequences are not merely hypothetical; they are actively shaping the political landscape. In New Zealand, a study of female MPs found that online abuse had contributed to some politicians' decisions to retire, while others said they would have reconsidered a career in politics had they known the extent of the abuse beforehand.[15] This evidence demonstrates that the abuse is not a byproduct of political discourse but a core strategy of perpetrators, a tactic "absolutely aimed at driving us out".[15] Similarly, an Amnesty International study in India and a British Parliamentary Committee survey found that a number of female politicians chose not to stand for re-election due to the level of online abuse they faced.[18] The problem is so severe that it can push women out of politics altogether, with one in five Irish female politicians in a study stating they had considered quitting due to the harassment.[20] A former U.S. politician, Susanna Gibson, shared that after she narrowly lost her legislative race due to online harassment, she heard from young women who were discouraged from running for office out of fear of their intimate images being used to harass them.[12] The cumulative effect of this abuse undermines the principle of representative democracy, as it actively discourages a significant portion of the population from participating in public life.[23] This 'gendered chilling effect' is not a hypothetical concern; studies, including one published in *The Parliamentarian* on the impact of hate speech on electoral

integrity, demonstrate how these digital harms are a direct threat to the legitimacy of democratic processes.

2.3 Commonwealth Case Studies: A Global Challenge

The problem of technology-facilitated violence against women Parliamentarians is global and pervasive, affecting both developed and developing Commonwealth countries. The following case studies illustrate the severity of the problem.

In Australia, the issue has led to direct legislative action. Minister Tanya Plibersek championed the **Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material) Bill 2024**, which criminalises the non-consensual sharing of deepfake pornography.[25] Plibersek noted that this abuse is overwhelmingly directed at women and girls and that the legislation was a necessary step to address "what is happening to people online is having a real-world impact".[25]

Parliamentarians are the primary drivers of legislative reform, a role exemplified by the UK's legislative action on deepfakes. *The Parliamentarian* featured an article on 'Legislation to criminalise 'deepfake' creation targeting women,' which provides a detailed look at how a specific law was conceived, debated, and passed to protect women in public life.

The situation in New Zealand is equally dire, as revealed by a University of Otago study. It found that female MPs are subjected to verbal threats of rape and physical assaults with weapons, with some receiving death threats.[15] The study's findings indicate that harassment levels rise as women attain more senior roles, and a "dramatic reduction" in abuse occurred after a woman was replaced by a male colleague in a senior leadership position.[15]

In Canada, high-profile cases have demonstrated the dangerous link between online harassment and offline threats. Minister Catherine McKenna and MP Jenny Kwan have been targets of online vitriol that has escalated into physical attacks on their offices, requiring them to implement significant security measures such as panic buttons, security cameras, and private consultants.[18]

The challenge is particularly acute in developing economies, where online harassment often intersects with pre-existing social inequalities. A 2020 Amnesty International study found that Indian female politicians face exceptionally high levels of abuse, receiving an average of 113 problematic or abusive tweets per day.[26] This harassment is compounded

by intersectional factors; Muslim women received 94.1% more ethnic or religious slurs, and women from marginalised castes were 59% more likely to be abused.[26] This stark data shows that online violence is not an isolated phenomenon but a direct reflection and amplification of a society's deep-seated gender, religious, and caste-based inequalities.[2]

Table 2: Regional Comparison of Violence Against Women in Politics

Type of Violence	Asia-Pacific (2025) [27]	Africa (2021) [27]	Europe (2018) [27]
Psychological violence	76%	80%	85%
Sexual violence	25%	39%	25%
Physical violence	13%	23%	15%
Economic violence	24%	29%	14%

This table, drawing from IPU regional studies, provides a powerful comparative overview, demonstrating that while the prevalence of different types of violence may vary by region, the problem itself is a persistent and pervasive reality that knows no national or economic boundaries.[27]

3. Navigating the Free Speech vs. Hate Speech Debate

The discussion on how to legislate against online abuse is often framed as a conflict between the principles of free speech and the need to regulate hate speech. This is a nuanced area, especially for Parliamentarians who are tasked with protecting both freedom of expression and public safety.

In many legal traditions, including that of the United States, there is no formal legal definition of "hate speech," and the expression of distasteful, offensive, or hateful ideas is generally protected under free speech jurisprudence.[28] The line is typically crossed

when the speech directly incites "imminent criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence".[28]

However, when applied to TFVAW, the free speech versus hate speech debate is often a false dichotomy. The types of abuse documented in this report—including doxing, non-consensual image sharing, and explicit threats of rape or death—are not forms of political discourse; they are criminal acts that would be illegal offline.[9] These perpetrators are not engaging in reasoned political debate but are instead using technology to stalk, extort, and intimidate. By framing these actions as a matter of free speech, they attempt to hide behind a foundational democratic principle while actively engaging in behaviour that undermines democracy by silencing political opponents.[22] A Parliament's role is not to limit the free exchange of ideas but to ensure the rule of law is applied to criminal behaviour, whether it occurs online or offline.

4. Social and Political Implications Beyond the Individual

The consequences of technology-facilitated violence extend far beyond the personal harm inflicted on individual women. The widespread nature of this problem has significant implications for democratic governance, national security, and social cohesion.

4.1 Online Misogyny and Radicalisation

Online misogyny is not an isolated subculture; it is a significant driver of radicalisation and violent extremism.[6] Extremist groups exploit gender-based violence as a recruitment tactic, using it as a "gateway to radicalisation" and a tool to incite violence and support the "rollback of women's rights".[6] This is compounded by the design of social media platforms themselves. A 2024 study from Dublin City University found that social media algorithms rapidly amplify misogynistic and male supremacist content, feeding extremist material to users even if they did not actively seek it out.[25] This algorithmic amplification normalises misogynistic violence and creates a pipeline for radicalisation, posing a direct threat to public safety and the principles of liberal democracy. The urgency of this threat is being actively debated within the Commonwealth, with a recent article in *The Parliamentarian* titled *'Artificial Intelligence, disinformation and Parliament'* highlighting the new legislative challenges posed by AI-generated content.

4.2 A Failure of Systems

The lack of effective institutional and systemic responses exacerbates the problem, creating a culture of impunity for perpetrators. In New Zealand, female MPs reported that their concerns about physical danger were minimised by authorities when they attempted to report threats.[15] Similarly, social media companies have been criticised for their slow and often ineffective responses to reports of abuse.[29] The American Sunlight Project study on deepfakes noted that while some content targeting women in politics was removed after being reported, researchers could not guarantee the content would not be re-uploaded or that search results for the material would be removed from major search engines.[12] This demonstrates a critical failure of platforms to provide consistent standards of regulation and enforcement, allowing perpetrators to operate with relative impunity and creating a disparity of privilege for those who do not have the resources of a congressional office.[5]

5. Strategies and Recommendations: A Path Forward

Addressing this multifaceted threat requires a holistic, integrated, and intersectional approach that extends beyond simple digital self-defence to include legislative reform, institutional accountability, and international collaboration.

5.1 Legislative and Legal Frameworks

Parliaments have a unique opportunity to lead in modernising legal frameworks to effectively combat TFVAW.

- **Harmonised Definitions:** The first step is to collaborate on and adopt a common, comprehensive legal definition of technology-facilitated violence and its various forms, such as doxing and deepfakes.[3] This will provide a clear basis for data collection, law enforcement, and prosecution.

- **Specific Legislation:** Parliaments should enact new laws that specifically criminalise acts of political violence against women, drawing inspiration from pioneering legislation in Bolivia and Mexico.[22]

- **Platform Accountability:** Legislation should be introduced to hold social media companies accountable for the harms on their platforms, including provisions for

a civil right of action for victims of sexual harassment and for the timely removal of abusive content.[5]

5.2 Institutional and Parliamentary Action

The onus should not be solely on the victim to protect themselves. Parliaments must lead by example, creating a supportive culture and institutional mechanisms to combat abuse.

- **Codes of Conduct:** Implement and strictly enforce internal Codes of Conduct for Parliamentarians and their staff to define and prohibit unacceptable behaviour both online and offline.[1]

- **Cross-Party Alliances:** Establish women's parliamentary forums and encourage cross-party collaboration to share concerns and develop collective solutions. These alliances are vital for creating gender-sensitive policies, especially in legislatures where women are a minority.[1]

- **Survivor-Centered Support Systems:** Create robust and confidential support systems that provide women Parliamentarians and their staff with legal, psychological, and technical assistance. These services should prioritise the safety, well-being, and agency of survivors, and be designed with an intersectional lens to address the unique vulnerabilities of women from marginalised groups.[30]

These institutional efforts are championed by networks such as the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP), which provides a dedicated platform for female Members to share experiences and collectively advocate for change. The CPA has also developed its own "Standards for Codes of Conduct for MPs", which provides a benchmark for Parliaments to create and enforce ethical guidelines that explicitly address online harms and a safe workplace culture.

5.3 Digital and Personal Security

While institutional support is critical, Parliamentarians should also be equipped with essential digital self-defence strategies.

- **Digital Hygiene:** Provide training on securing accounts and devices with complex passwords, and using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to protect personal information.[19]

- **Documentation and Reporting:** Educate MPs and their teams on how to systematically document all instances of online abuse, which is crucial for building a strong evidence base for law enforcement and platform reports.[19] For example, the CPA's *'Parliamentary Security: An Introductory Guide'* provides Parliamentarians and staff with actionable security frameworks, checklists, and non-technical advice on how to mitigate risks, including those posed by digital threats like doxing and cyberstalking.

- **Creating Boundaries:** Encourage the establishment of clear "page policies" for social media accounts to set expectations for respectful discourse. MPs can also be trained on assertive communication to manage online discourse effectively and disengage from abusive interactions.[1]

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this report confirms that technology-facilitated abuse and violence against women Parliamentarians is an escalating, borderless, and profoundly damaging threat. It is a modern manifestation of age-old gendered violence, exacerbated by the anonymity of the internet and the amplifying power of new technologies like AI. This abuse is not a mere inconvenience; it is a direct assault on women's human rights, a deliberate tactic to drive them from public life, and a foundational challenge to the health of our democratic institutions.

Parliaments, as the cornerstones of democracy, have a moral and political obligation to lead in this fight. The task ahead is clear: it requires a paradigm shift from a reactive, piecemeal approach to a comprehensive, integrated, and proactive strategy. By modernising legal frameworks, reforming institutional cultures, and holding technology companies accountable, Parliamentarians can transform the digital space from a hostile battlefield into a vibrant and safe arena for political engagement. In doing so, they will not only protect their colleagues but also ensure that the voices of women are not silenced but are instead amplified for generations to come.

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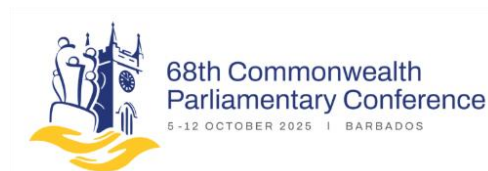
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