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TJM

Online Hate against
Members of the European Parliament

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In Focus:
Online Hate against Politicians

Online hate directed towards politicians has emerged as a growing concern in recent years. The rise of social media platforms has led to an unprecedented access to public figures such as politicians and hundreds of millions of users have gained the opportunity to participate in political discussions online. However, the social media environment has also fostered a culture of toxicity, abuse and radicalisation and politicians are increasingly confronted with destructive discourse and personalised attacks (Cheng et al., 2015). Online hate directed towards politicians can have severe consequences such as eroding trust in government, threatening democratic processes, and leading to violence in real life (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021; Ziccardi, 2020). A deeper understanding of the phenomenon of online hate directed towards politicians is therefore crucial not only for ensuring the well-being of elected politicians but also for the protection of democratic principles more generally.

References

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Study Findings in a Nutshell

- Online hate directed at Members of the European Parliament is highly gendered

- Female MEPs are more likely to receive sexualised forms of violence & patronising and infantilising comments

- The psychological costs of online hate are greater for female politicians - they are more likely to feel intimidated, stressed and ashamed

- Online hate has a stronger silencing effect on female politicians - they are more likely to change the tone/content of their political messages, reduce the frequency of public appearances or withdraw from social media

- **Online hate is a threat to women's representation in politics and to democracy more fundamentally**

Research Study on Online Hate against Members of the European Parliament

The aim of this research study was to assess the extent and nature of online hate that Members of the European Parliament are exposed to and to understand their emotional and political reactions to the hate they receive. To this end, a short online survey was circulated among all Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in February 2023, with five reminders being sent out until 10 March 2023. The survey took five to ten minutes to complete and was targeted at both male and female MEPs, irrespective of whether they themselves had received online hate or not. The survey could also be filled out by staff members working for MEPs. However, staff members were only prompted to respond to questions on the frequency and kind of online hate received by their MEPs and potential political reactions to these, whereas questions on the individual emotional reactions to online hate were only asked to MEPs directly. MEPs who indicated to not having been targeted by online hate were asked whether they have witnessed online attacks against a colleague of theirs and how this made them feel.

Who was Participating in the Online Survey?
A total of 78 MEPs or staff of MEPs participated in the survey, however, only 60 out of 78 fully completed the survey. 47% of these were MEPs and 53% of these were staff members of MEPs. 48% of the MEPs represented in the survey were female and 52% were male (see Figure 1). Most participating MEPs were between 35-65 years old, 5% of participants were below age 35 and 7% were 65 years and older. The study recruited MEPs across the political spectrum with 50% of MEPs identifying as left, 30% as centre, and 20% as right in their political orientation.

Study Limitations
It is important to note that the study sample was relatively small. We were therefore unable to conduct more disaggregated analyses on the possible intersectionality between online hate and MEPs' ethnicity, left-right ideology, age, and sexual orientation. The study sample is also not necessarily representative of all MEPs. To illustrate this: it is possible that MEPs who are exposed to online hate themselves were more willing to participate in the survey, which would have led to an overestimation of the prevalence of online hate among MEPs.
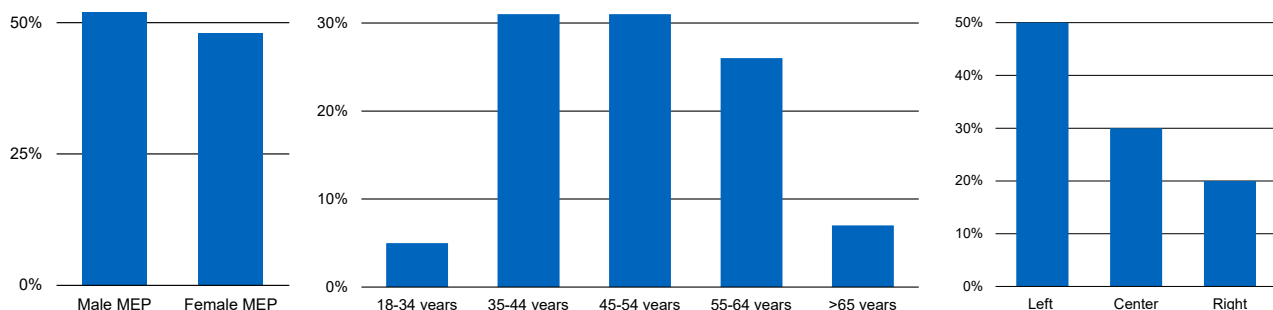

Figure 1. Characteristics of Survey Participants.

Experiences of Online Hate by Members of the European Parliament

We define online hate as the posting and sharing of hateful and prejudiced content against an individual, group or community. It can take the form of derogatory, demonising and dehumanising statements, threats, identity-based insults, pejorative terms and slurs. 77% of all male MEPs and 66% of all female MEPs who participated in the survey reported that they had been affected by online hate directed towards them at some point in their political career (see Figure 2). Online hate is most often perpetrated by someone unknown (in 65% of cases) and 40% of participants indicated that online hate is predominantly perpetrated by men, 50% indicated not always knowing the gender of the perpetrators, and only 10% indicated that online hate is perpetrated by men and women alike (see Figure 3).
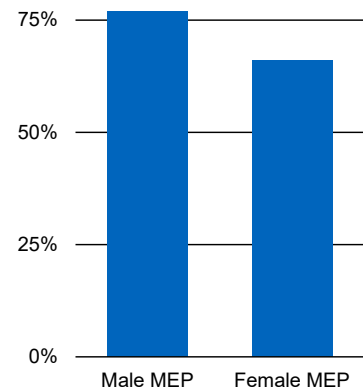

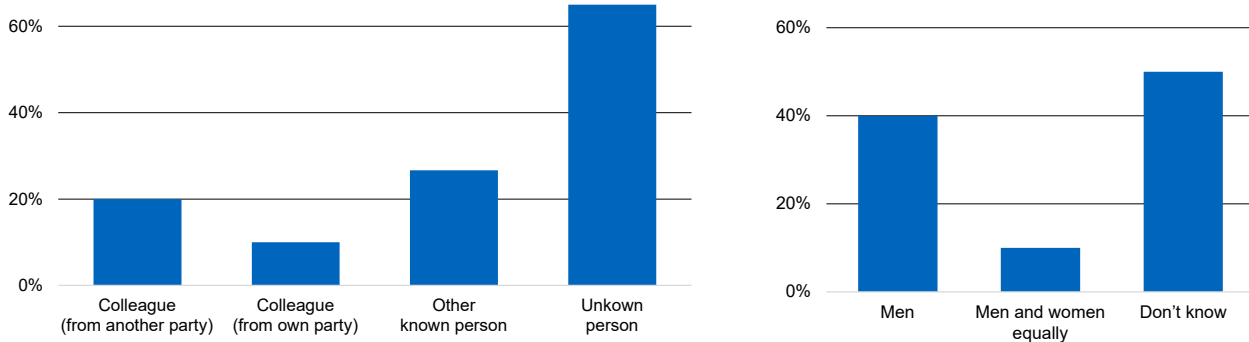*Figure 2. Online Hate Received by Male and Female MEPs.*

Figure 3: Perpetrators of Online Hate.

Different Types of Online Hate by Gender

While male and female parliamentarians generally receive comparable amounts of online hate, our survey revealed that the kind of hate received is highly gendered (see Figure 4). Female parliamentarians were more likely to receive sexualised forms of online hate, including rape threats (21% of participating female MEPs), and patronising and infantilising comments (41% of female vs. 16% of male MEPs). Women were also more likely to receive comments about their physical appearance (41% of female vs. 29% of male MEPs) or having sexually charged images or videos of them spread (17% of female vs. 3% of male MEPs). Female parliamentarians were also more exposed to hateful comments about their private life (31% of female vs. 10% of male MEPs). Male parliamentarians, in contrast, were more likely to receive threats of physical violence (42% of male vs. 34% of female MEPs) and have misinformation about themselves spread on social media (42% of male vs. 34% of female MEPs). A comparable percentage of male and female MEPs reported having been confronted with death threats, namely 29% of male and 24% of female MEPs.

Survey participants were also asked to indicate on which basis they thought the MEP was attacked online. Again, the responses revealed crucial gender differences (see Figure 5). Female MEPs were more likely to be attacked on the basis of their gender (31% of female vs. 0% of male MEPs), their looks (24% of female vs. 13% of male MEPs) or their feminist views (41% of female vs. 3% of male MEPs). Conversely, male MEPs were more likely attacked based on their political views (65% of male vs. 55% of female MEPs) or because they acted as bystanders for other victims of online abuse (26% of male vs. 3% of female MEPs).
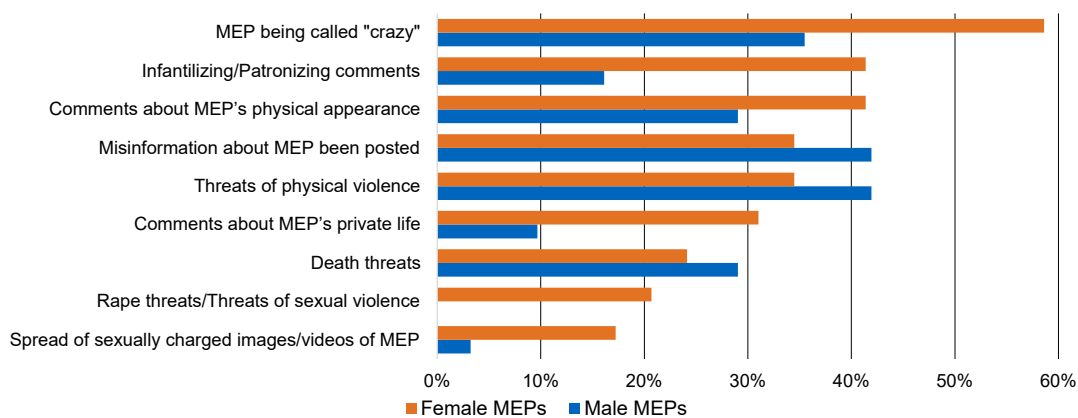

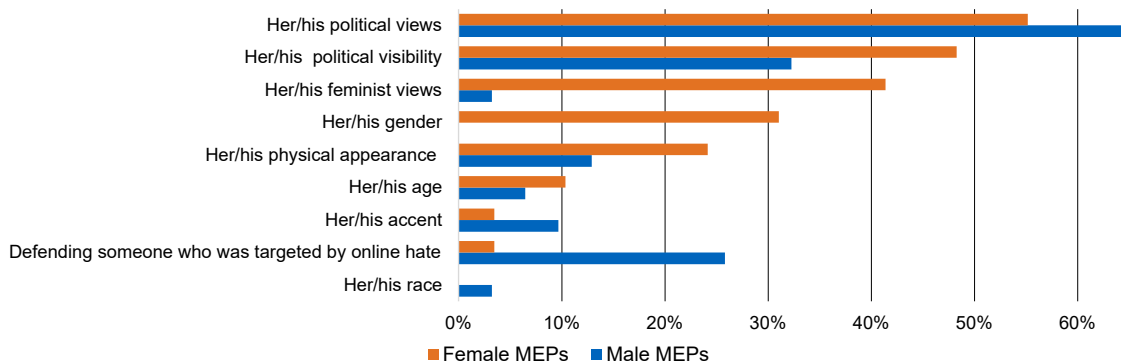*Figure 4: Different Types of Online Hate by Gender*

Figure 5. Causes of Online Hate.

MEPs' Emotional Reactions to Online Hate

Male and female parliamentarians also react differently to the online attacks they receive. Overall, online hate appears to place a higher emotional burden on female targets (see Figure 6). Female MEPs were more likely to feel stressed (43% of female vs. 14% of male MEPs), intimidated and belittled (21% of female vs. 0% of male MEPs) and concerned about their reputation (43% of female vs. 7% of male MEPs) when they were exposed to online hate. Female parliamentarians participating in the survey also disclosed that they felt ashamed (14%) and socially isolated (21%) after hate attacks, while none of the male parliaments showed these reactions. Female MEPs were also more likely than male MEPs to feel unsafe on social media (36% of female vs. 29% of male MEPs) and felt more constrained in their ability to express their political opinion (36% of female vs. 14% of male MEPs) in the context of online hate. However, male MEPs were more likely concerned about their safety offline (29% of male and 21% of female MEPs) as well as the safety of their friend and family (21% of male and 7% of female MEPs) when facing online hate.

Female MEPs also more commonly engage with the online attacks they receive (see Figure 7). For example, female parliamentarians were more likely than their male colleagues to comment on the hate attack (66% of female vs. 48% of male MEPs), report them to the platform (45% of female vs. 29% of male MEPs), confront the offender (24% of female vs. 9% of male MEPs) or block/mute the offender (55% of female vs. 39% of male MEPs).
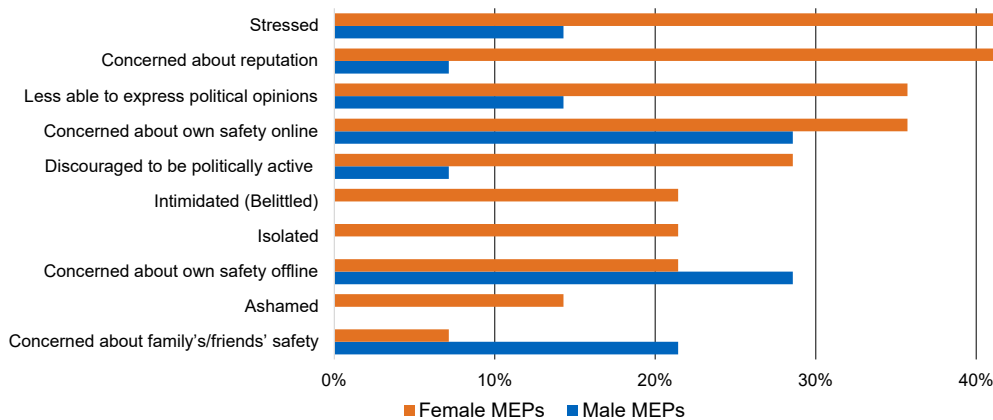

Figure 6: Emotional Reactions to Online Hate by Gender.
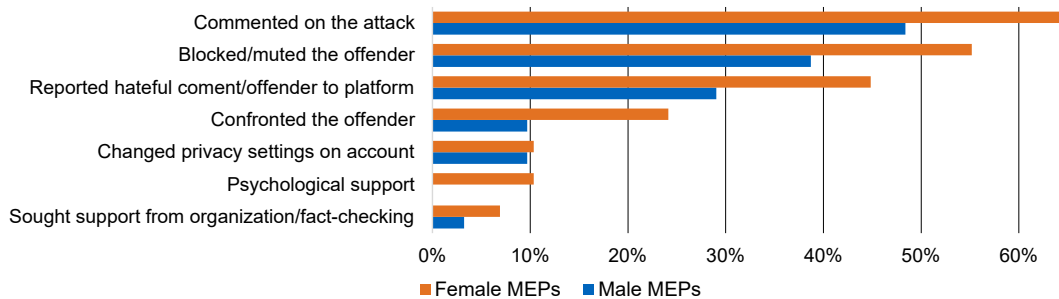

Figure 7: Engagement with Online Hate by Gender.

Does Online Hate Have a Potential Silencing Effect on Female Politicians?

Lastly, the survey assessed whether online hate has the potential to politically intimidate or even silence politicians. Similar to the findings above, hate attacks appear to have more detrimental political consequences for female parliamentarians (see Figure 8). Notably, female MEPs were more likely than male MEPs to reduce the frequency of their social media posts (17% of female vs. 6% of male MEPs) or to take a break from social media altogether (14% of female vs. 6% of male MEPs) in reaction to incidents of online abuse. In addition, female MEPs were more likely than their male counterparts to decrease public appearances (14% of female vs. 0% of male MEPs) and to change the tone (7% of female vs. 3% of male MEPs) or content (10% of female vs. 3% of male MEPs) of their political messages or social media posts.
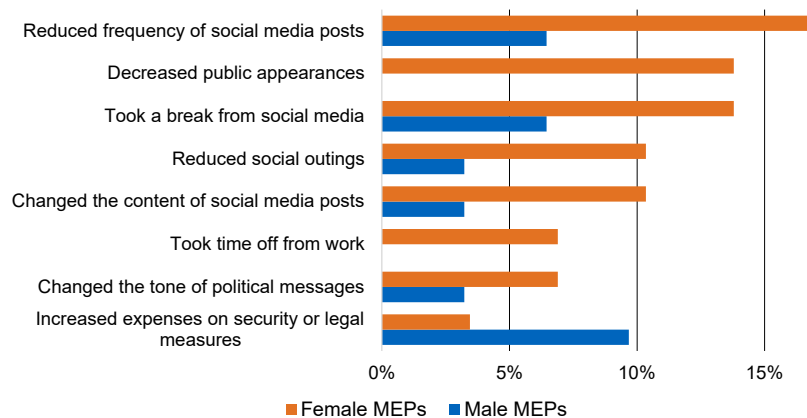

Figure 8: Political Consequences of Online Hate.

A Gendered form of Online Abuse: Online Misogyny

The above findings drawn from the online survey with Members of the European Parliament suggest that female politicians are facing a highly gendered and sexualised kind of online hate. We refer to this form of hate as **online misogyny**. Online misogyny can be defined as "the harassment of women on the internet, mostly on social media platforms via abusive and sexist language or imagery as well as threats of violence" (Ging et al., 2019; Massanari, 2017). Typical expressions of online misogyny include **body shaming, sexualisation/objectification, use of harmful stereotypes, infantilising and patronising language, and rape threats**, amongst others. Online misogyny can be seen as a critical component of violence against women more broadly. Target 5.b. of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals highlights the right for women to "use enabling technology, in particular, information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women" (UN 2015). As people's lives become increasingly digitally mediated, gender-based violence has likewise shifted to the digital realm (Woodlock, 2017). Participating in political online discussion is a right that has to be granted to all women. Yet, online misogyny hampers the entrance and persistence of women more broadly and female politicians more specifically in the online world and should therefore be recognised as **a major threat to women's representation in politics**.

Wider Research Study

bidt Bayerisches Forschungsinstitut für Digitale Transformation

Between 2022-2024, the Principal Investigators Prof. Jürgen Pfeffer and Prof. Janina Steinert from Technical University of Munich (TUM), together with Prof. Sahana Udupa from Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich (LMU) are implementing a research study on "Understanding, Detecting, and Mitigating Online Misogyny Against Politically Active Women", funded by the Bavarian Research Institute for Digital Transformation (bidt). The research study acknowledges that online misogyny against politically active women has become an alarming negative feature of online discussions on current political topics. The interdisciplinary research team will employ mixed-methods approaches to three case studies in Germany, India, and Brazil to better understand the content and dynamics of online misogyny against politically active women and to identify the potential political and democratic consequences of online misogyny. Apart from this, the research team will also develop tools and algorithms for early detection of such emerging dynamics and involve the general public in the process of identifying and denouncing online misogyny against politically active women.

Further Readings:

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Ladyane Souza, Luise Koch, Maria Paula Russo Riva & Natália Leal (2023). Viewpoint: Protecting Women Politicians from Online Abuse. Political Violence at a Glance. Retrieved from: https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2023/03/09/viewpoint-protecting-women-politicians-from-online-abuse/

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Impressum