

# The Gendered Harassment of Parliamentary Candidates in the UK

SOFÍA COLLIGNON, ROSIE CAMPBELL AND WOLFGANG RÜDIG

## Abstract

This article explores the role gender plays in the harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) of parliamentary candidates in the UK at election time. Using data from the Representative Audit of Britain surveys (2015–2019) this article takes an intersectional approach to investigate whether trends identified in 2017 suggesting that women candidates reported more incidences of HAI and were more likely to be concerned for their personal safety as a result than men, remain apparent in the subsequent election. Results suggest that HAI is getting worse for candidates in general, and the gender gap is widening. About three in every four women experienced some levels of fear while campaigning.

**Keywords:** harassment, VAW-P, women, gender, candidates

## Background

THIS ARTICLE uses data from the Representative Audit of Britain (RAB), a survey of all parliamentary candidates who stood in the 2015–2019 British general elections, in order to explore the role gender plays in the experiences of harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) by parliamentary candidates at election time. Previous research has shown that in 2017, women candidates reported more incidences of abuse and were more likely than men to be concerned for their personal safety as a result.<sup>1</sup> This paper compares the 2017 and 2019 general elections in order to identify whether this gender gap in experience of harassment was apparent in the subsequent election and provides a more detailed insight into the gendered nature of harassment and its impact on candidates.

The issue of violence against women in politics has received renewed attention in recent years in the wake of a number of high-profile attacks on women politicians and a wave of women's activism calling for change.<sup>2</sup> Several

small sample studies of women parliamentarians have shown alarmingly high levels of experiences of sexual harassment and violence against women politicians globally.<sup>3</sup> Extant research suggests that women politicians are subject to a hugely disproportionate share of sexualised abuse online, and offline, women often experience more threatening and sexualised threats and attacks. Furthermore, black and minority ethnic women are disproportionately targeted compared with white women.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, the study of violence against women in politics has been subsumed within the study of the harassment and intimidation

*Violence Against Women in Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians*, 2016 and 2018; <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>; <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe> (both accessed 21 September 2021).

<sup>4</sup>S. Collignon and W. Rüdig, 'Increasing the cost of female representation? Violence towards women in politics in the UK', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 2021; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17457289.2021.1968413> (accessed 21 September 2021).

<sup>1</sup>S. Collignon and W. Rüdig, 'Lessons on the harassment and intimidation of parliamentary candidates in the United Kingdom', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2020, pp. 422–429.

<sup>2</sup>J. Bigio and R. Vogelstein, 'Women under attack', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 99, 2020, p. 131. M. L. Krook,

of politicians more broadly. However, in recent years there have been calls for the re-conceptualisation of violence against women in politics to be understood as a distinct phenomenon. Mona Lena Krook argues that political violence against women ‘aims to exclude women as women from the political sphere via dynamics of structural, cultural, and symbolic violence’.<sup>5</sup> Harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) of all candidates is a challenge to democracy; by its very nature it is intended to silence and intimidate in order to limit free and fair participation in the democratic process. Abuse targeted at women candidates is aimed at suppressing women’s full political participation as women. In this article, we assess the extent to which women candidates standing in the 2019 British general election were targets of abuse.

The 2019 election provides an important case study for measuring gendered political abuse. Several high-profile women MPs retiring from Parliament in 2019 cited gendered harassment and intimidation amongst their reasons for not seeking re-election. These complaints cut across parties, but were disproportionately evident among Conservative women MPs. In 2019, nineteen women MPs stood down, roughly proportionate to the representation of women in the House, but the nine Conservative (and former Conservative MPs who had resigned from the party) women who retired were on average six years younger than retiring Conservative men and had spent eight fewer years in the House.<sup>6</sup> Heidi Allen, Nicky Morgan, Amber Rudd and Caroline Spelman all raised the issue of the harassment and intimidation of women politicians and the increasing polarisation and hostility in British politics among their reasons for exiting the Commons. A further indication of the concern shared by many women MPs was the public letter signed by more than seventy women MPs, in solidarity with Megan Markle, stating that they shared ‘an understanding of the abuse and intimidation which is now so often used as a means of disparaging women in public

office from getting on with our very important work’. Analysis of the impact of experience of abuse on women’s campaign strategies has shown that there can be a damaging link whereby women who experience intimidation restrict their campaigning strategies.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there is an urgent need to understand the level, nature and impact of HAI in order to develop and implement measures to tackle it. Here, we assess whether there has been any change in the reported levels of abuse experienced by candidates between 2017 and 2019, whether men and women report differing rates and types of abuse and the extent to which women candidates from ethnic minority communities are disproportionately targeted.

## Data and methods

In the wake of the horrific murder in 2016 of Jo Cox, the MP for Batley and Spen, by a misogynist white supremacist, and widespread reporting of the hostile environment women politicians found themselves negotiating in the polarised post-EU referendum politics, we included a new component to the RAB survey. We incorporated a battery of specially designed survey items in 2017, which we then augmented in 2019, intended to measure the level and impact of the abuse of parliamentary candidates and the extent to which it is gendered. We take a victim-centred approach and focus on experiences that the candidates themselves label as HAI, avoiding providing a stringent definition that will most likely prompt candidates to leave out experiences of psychological abuse.<sup>8</sup>

The RAB is an original individual-level survey of all candidates who stood in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 UK general elections. In total our 2017/19 sample is made up of 2,657 candidates, with 1,495 responses from candidates standing in 2017 (53 per cent response rate) and 1,162 responses (36 per cent response rate) from those standing in 2019. The response rate varies between parties and, therefore, our statistical analyses are weighted by party.

<sup>5</sup>Krook, *Violence Against Women*.

<sup>6</sup>C. Butler, R. Campbell and J. van Heerde-Hudson, ‘Political recruitment under pressure, again: MPs and candidates in the 2019 general election’, in T. Bale, R. Ford, W. Jennings and P. Surrudge, eds., *The British General Election, 2019*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup>Collignon and Rüdiger, ‘Increasing the cost of female representation’.

<sup>8</sup>Collignon and Rüdiger, ‘Lessons on the harassment and intimidation’; Collignon and Rüdiger, ‘Increasing the cost of female representation’.

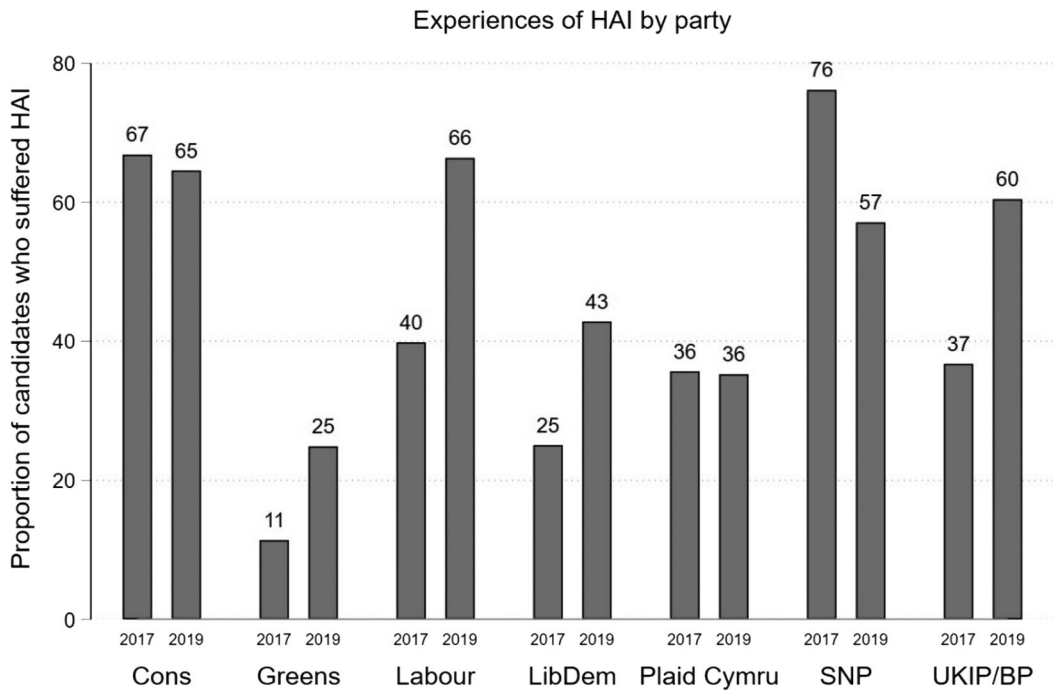


Figure 1: Proportion of candidates by party targeted by HAI

## Findings

### 1) *Despite all efforts, harassment, abuse and intimidation (HAI) of parliamentary candidates appears to be getting worse*

Overall, in 2019, 49 per cent of candidates indicated that they had suffered any form HAI while campaigning. This is a significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) increase of 11 percentage points compared with 2017, when 38 per cent of the candidates answered positively to the same question.<sup>9</sup> These results are extremely worrying, as they suggest that nearly half of all candidates experienced some form of abuse. Yet, since we focus on experiences that candidates label as HAI, we must be a little cautious comparing the absolute levels of HAI between elections. This is because it is possible that greater awareness of the issue has prompted more candidates to recognise

the problem. However, there is also a danger that the experience of HAI will be ‘normalised’ as an inevitable consequence of seeking electoral office. Additionally, varying response rates between the two surveys might limit their comparability.

The level of HAI reported in the survey varies significantly by party and the targets of the most abuse shifted between the elections, potentially demonstrating the impact that political context can have on the toxicity of the political environment. Figure 1 shows that in 2017, candidates standing for the Conservatives and the Scottish National Party were the targets of the most abuse, with 67 per cent and 76 per cent of candidates indicating that they had suffered HAI while campaigning. In 2019, the abuse was more focussed on the Conservative (65 per cent) and Labour (66 per cent) candidates. The largest change was experienced by candidates from the Labour Party, with a 26 percentage point increase between 2017 and 2019 in the levels of HAI reported by candidates. These are extremely high levels of HAI, with the majority of candidates from the largest parties

<sup>9</sup>Collignon and Rüdiger, ‘Lessons on the harassment and intimidation’.

indicating that they were subject to some kind of abuse during the election campaign.

## 2) Women experience higher rates of HAI than men and that gap appears to be widening

Our analysis suggests that HAI has a gendered component. As Figure 2 shows, in 2017 and 2019 women suffered disproportionate levels of HAI. In 2017, 45 per cent of women respondents to the survey reported experiencing of some form of HAI whilst campaigning, compared with 35 per cent of men. By 2019, a sizeable majority of women reported experiencing HAI (58 per cent), alarmingly suggesting that for women candidates, experience of HAI whilst campaigning is becoming the norm. Moreover, the gap between men and women candidates who experienced harassment while campaigning appears to be widening. In 2017, the gap was of 9 percentage points and this increased to 13 percentage points in 2019. Thus, we can say that the rate of HAI by candidates in 2019 was worse than in 2017 and the speed at which the situation is worsening is somewhat faster for women than men.

## 3) BAME and LGBT+ women report the highest rates of HAI

Our analysis shows that intersectionality plays a role in candidates' experiences of abuse. Our sample includes 200 candidates (7.53 per cent) who identify as being Black, Asian or from an ethnic minority (BAME), giving us sufficient sample size for a four-way comparison between BAME and white, women and men. Our results show increasing levels of HAI among BAME candidates, with 55 per cent of BAME respondents reporting experiencing abuse in 2019 ( $p \geq 0.1$ ) compared with 37 per cent in 2017 ( $p < 0.05$ ). The data suggest that BAME women are particularly likely to experience HAI. The combined gender and ethnicity gap in experiences of HAI is enormous, with 63 per cent of BAME women candidates ( $p < 0.05$ ) reporting experiencing abuse compared with 38 per cent of BAME men, 34 per cent of white men and 45 per cent of white women. In other words, white women reported higher levels of abuse than men (BAME and white), but white women were significantly less likely to experience HAI than BAME women.

We also have sufficient sample size for a consideration of the intersection between sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. The

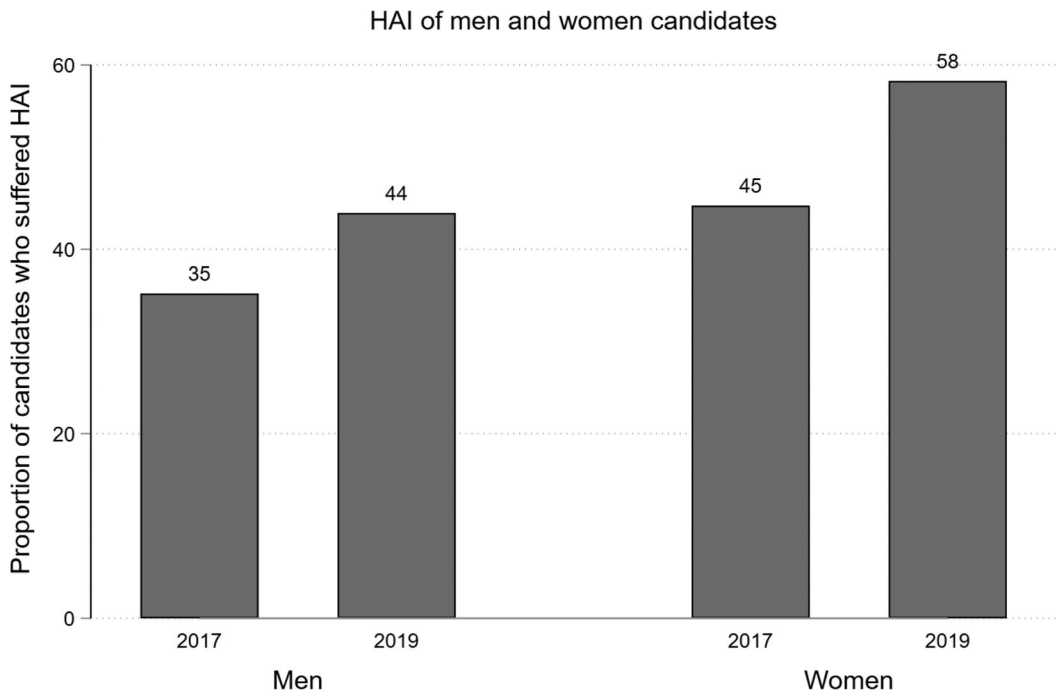


Figure 2: HAI in 2017 and 2019

sample includes 204 candidates who identify as members of the LGBT+ community (7.68 per cent). Overall, we find evidence ( $p < 0.1$ ) that members of the LGBT+ community were somewhat more likely to report experiences of HAI, with 45 per cent of LGBT+ candidates suffering abuse. Furthermore, there is evidence of intersectionality between sexual identity and sex. Fifty-eight per cent of LGBT+ women suffered harassment, significantly more than LGBT+ men (39 per cent) and more than heterosexual cis women and men (46 and 34 per cent, respectively).

The sample also includes 183 candidates (6.89 per cent) who indicated that they have a disability. We do not find evidence that candidates with a disability report higher levels of HAI ( $p > 0.05$ ). We are cautious about drawing strong conclusions from this evidence, as the category most likely includes disabilities which are not visible or publicly declared.

#### 4) Online HAI appears to be on the rise, and getting worse for women

We asked candidates about the nature of the HAI they suffered. Table 1 shows that, with the

exception of receiving threatening or abusive phone calls, property damage and people loitering around the candidate, levels of all other forms of HAI were higher in 2019 than in the 2017 survey. Abuse on social media, email and being approached are the three forms of abuse that presented the highest rise in frequency between 2019 and 2017. In 2019, 45 per cent of candidates suffered abuse on social media (29 per cent in 2017), 35 per cent received threatening or abusive emails (23 per cent in 2017) and 25 per cent faced unwanted approaches (14 per cent in 2017).

In 2019, women were significantly more likely to suffer abuse both online and offline than men. Overall, 54 per cent of women and 40 per cent of men reported being the targets of abuse on social media, 42 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men reported being targeted by email, and 13 per cent of women and 9 per cent of men reported receiving abusive phone calls. Women were also slightly more likely to report receiving threatening letters (18 per cent of women compared to 15 per cent of men), to be followed (11 per cent of women and 7 per cent of men) and loitered around (8 per cent of women and 5 per cent of men), and to be threatened with physical harm

**Table 1: Types of harassment, abuse and intimidation**

Type of HAI experienced		2017			2019			Notes
		M	W	Total	M	W	Total	
Physical abuse	%	4	5	4	6	3	5	Year $p < 0.1$ ; sex 2017 and 2019 $p > 0.05$
Threatened	%	12	12	12	16	23	18	Year $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2017 $p > 0.05$ ; sex 2019 $p < 0.05$
Approached	%	13	15	14	22	32	25	Year $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2017 $p > 0.05$ ; sex 2019 $p < 0.05$
Followed	%	6	8	7	7	11	9	Year $p < 0.1$ ; sex 2017 $p > 0.05$ ; sex 2019 $p < 0.05$
Loitered	%	6	7	6	5	8	6	Year $p < 0.1$ ; sex 2017 $p > 0.05$ ; sex 2019 $p > 0.05$
Property damage	%	5	6	6	6	5	6	Year $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2017 and 2019 $p > 0.05$
Sexually harassed	%	0	3	1	1	5	2	Year $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2017 and 2019 $p < 0.05$
Letters	%	11	11	11	15	18	16	Year $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2017 $p > 0.05$ ; sex 2019 $p < 0.05$
Phone	%	11	11	11	9	13	10	Year $p > 0.05$ ; sex 2017 $p > 0.05$ ; sex 2019 $p < 0.05$
Emails	%	20	28	23	31	42	35	Year $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2017 $p < 0.1$ ; sex 2019 $p < 0.05$
Social media	%	26	34	29	40	54	45	Year $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2017 $p < 0.05$ ; sex 2019 $p < 0.05$

**Table 2: Emotional response to HAI**

Feelings	2017			2019			
		Not at all	Moderately	Very	Not at all	Moderately	Very
Annoyed	M %	71	10	19	25	46	29
(year $p \leq 0.05$ , $p \leq 0.05$ )	F %	63	8	28	22	33	45
Concerned	M %	70	15	15	25	48	27
(year $p \leq 0.05$ ; sex $p \leq 0.05$ )	F %	62	14	23	20	32	48
Fearful	M %	70	15	15	26	60	14
(year $p \leq 0.05$ ; sex $p \leq 0.05$ )	F %	62	14	23	24	43	34

(23 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men), to be approached (32 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men) and to be sexually harassed (5 per cent of women and 1 per cent of men) than men. The largest difference observed relates to abuse on social media (14 percentage points' difference) and by email (11 percentage points' difference) and to receive unwanted approaches at home, at work or in public places (10 percentage points' difference).

### 5) *More than half of women report campaigning in fear*

The serious consequences of the psychological impact of HAI on parliamentary candidates is illustrated by the strength of their emotional reaction. Candidates in general report significantly higher levels of concern, annoyance and fear as a result of harassment in 2019 than they did in 2017 ( $P \leq 0.05$ ), as illustrated in Table 2. In 2019, 45 per cent of women candidates were very annoyed by harassment (compared with 29 per cent of men candidates), 48 per cent of women candidates were very concerned (27 per cent of men) and 34 per cent of women candidates were very fearful (14 per cent of men). Thus, women are over-represented among candidates who reported the most psychological impact of HAI. In all cases, we observe significant differences by sex ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Together, this indicates that candidates standing in 2019, in particular women candidates, had a challenging time whilst campaigning, as about three in every four experienced some levels of fear.

## Discussion

Our analysis shows that reported levels of HAI were significantly higher in the 2019 general

election than they were in 2017. We find a clear link between gender and experiences of harassment. Women reported higher levels of abuse than men and were more emotionally affected as a result. Black, Asian and minority ethnic women reported the highest levels of abuse, 64 per cent of BAME women surveyed experienced at least one form of HAI and LGBT+ women also reported higher levels of abuse. The extent of the problem is alarming and the fact that women from underrepresented groups report such high rates of HAI represents a serious challenge to our democratic processes and institutions.

Our research suggests that online forms of harassment appear to be becoming significantly more common, but reported rates of many forms of offline abuse are also increasing. The psychological impact on candidates is evident by the large proportion who report feeling fearful at some stage during the campaign and this impact is most pronounced for women.

Our research demonstrates the importance of measuring the scale and impact of HAI on candidates for elected office. Understanding the frequency and psychological effects of abuse of candidates is an important measure of democratic health. In a representative democracy such as ours, fair representation requires equal access to political participation and HAI is a deliberate attempt to place barriers in the way of diverse political recruitment. The Committee on Standards in Public Life 2017 review into intimidation in public life cited multiple sources of data, including our own, exposing the high and increasing levels of HAI in contemporary British politics. Several of the review's recommendations have been adopted or are in the process of being adopted. For example, a new offence of electoral offence of intimidation of candidates is

expected.<sup>10</sup> Our analysis shows the scale of the problem and its unequal impact. We hope that sharing these findings will be a further stimulus to more action.

*Sofia Collignon* is Lecturer in Political Communication at Royal Holloway, University of

London. *Rosie Campbell* is Professor of Politics and Director of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London. *Wolfgang Rüdiger* is Reader in Politics at the School of Government and Public Policy, University of Strathclyde.

---

<sup>10</sup>N. Johnson, 'Intimidation of candidates and voters', UK Parliament research briefing, no. 9192, 3 September 2021; <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9192/> (accessed 21 September 2021).