**Chapter 7: Othering Political Women: Online Misogyny, Racism and Ableism Towards Women in Public Life**

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**Abstract**

There has been much public debate and outrage about threats and abuse aimed at women in public life on social media like Twitter. Recent studies have made use of automated technologies to analyse the nature and extent of abuse received by prominent women revealing that women of colour are subjected to a disproportionate amount of misogynistic abuse and racial slurs. This is a huge problem that requires attention and whilst existing studies go some way to identifying the problem, they do little to analyse the true extent to which women in public life are othered in the digital environment. The chapter employs an inductive thematic analysis of 12,436 tweets to examine the extent to which abusive and more everyday forms of sexism, misogyny and racism pervade Twitter interactions between politicians and citizens. The analysis identified four themes: gendered and racist abuse; silencing and dismissal; questioning intelligence and position; and ‘benevolent’ othering. Since communicating with constituents is an essential part of any political representatives’ role, it can be difficult to avoid receiving abuse online. It is therefore essential to ensure that being subjected to online othering in the everyday working environment of women of colour does not become a way of excluding this historically underrepresented group from formal political affairs.

**Keywords**: ADD

**Introduction**

Formal political institutions have historically been dominated by men. This trend persists despite the legal, social and cultural gains made by women during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Women have often struggled to achieve equal levels of participation as political representatives due to a number of barriers such as the domination of political party structures by men, gendered stereotypes, social expectations amongst voters about who should be involved in politics, and material inequalities which leave them disproportionately responsibly for domestic labour (Childs, 2008). Women who also happen to have a disability and be Black Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) or LGBT+ have found it even harder to achieve the levels of political representation that they deserve due to a whole host of structural and material inequalities which intersect with their gendered identities (Evans, 2015; Ward; 2016). The role of mainstream media in reproducing inequalities experienced by women in politics generally is well-researched (Ross, 2002; O’Neill et al 2016; Harmer et al., 2017) but there are far fewer studies that adopt an intersectional framework to take into account the extent to which gender is just one layer of inequality for women from under-represented backgrounds (Ward, 2016).

In the twenty-first century, women politicians also have to contend with the ways in which digital media can also contribute to their continued marginalisation. There has been a good deal of public discussion and indeed academic research which explores the potential benefits of social media for political discussion and deliberation (Papacharissi, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005). However as has been experienced by other women in public life, there are also hugely problematic consequences of engaging in social media for women in politics. The abuse suffered online, and particularly on Twitter, by female and black Members of Parliament (MPs) in the United Kingdom has been well-documented in news coverage. Both Labour shadow cabinet minister Diane Abbott (The Guardian, 12th July 2018) and Scottish National Party MP Mhairi Black (The Independent, 8th March 2018) have spoken publicly and in parliament about the abuse they have suffered online from complete strangers who send offensive and inappropriate messages and images directly to them, with much of the content explicitly denigrating their racial identity and sexuality, as well as being gendered. This chapter analyses all of the tweets directly sent to the 33 women members of the UK parliament who are BAME, LGBTQ+ or have a disability of some kind, and who have active Twitter accounts. (Their details are explained below). We focus specifically on these women in order to ascertain whether women from currently under-represented groups are particularly likely to experience online othering behaviours on Twitter, and the particular nature of that othering.

The chapter will firstly rehearse the relevant literature about the relationship between women politicians and media and the extent to which online spaces can be considered hostile to women. The methods used in this study will then be explained in detail before we move on to present our findings. We will address four themes which we identified in the data: gendered and racist abuse; silencing and dismissal; questioning intelligence and position; and ‘benevolent othering’.

**Women, Media, Politics**

Media representations are an important means of understanding women’s participation in formal politics. Research has shown that mainstream media provide important insight into the ways in which the news media constructs and shape female politicians and their contribution in specifically gendered ways. The presence of political women in the news is paramount because it allows voters to conceive of politics as other than just a male-dominated arena, remote from their interests. This is seen as being especially important to engage women voters in the political process (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996). Numerous studies have demonstrated the extent to which women politicians tend to be marginalised in political news (Ross et al, 2013; O’Neill et al, 2016; Harmer and Southern, 2018), both in terms of the amount of coverage they receive and how much their voices and opinions are heard through direct citation. Women politicians are often also subjected to different media treatment than male colleagues. Women tend to be associated with political change or renewal which positions them as political outsiders; women are often portrayed as breaking through social convention to participate in politics and whose rise to power is unexpected, and their political experience downplayed; or they are represented as agents of change who could alter traditional ways of doing politics (Norris, 1997). There are negative consequences to these forms of framing because women are thus required to square an impossible circle where they have to be tough and assertive like men but are also expected make politics a more conciliatory process (Ross, 2002). This much-observed trend of presenting women as political outsiders therefore lends female politicians a novelty value that makes them particularly newsworthy at certain times which goes against the trend noted above. The attention paid to women’s clothes and other aspects of their appearances and family arrangements are further examples. These phenomena have been observed in a number of different countries (Lawrence and Rose, 2010; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). Framing serious women politicians in this manner reveals a dangerous tendency to trivialise and undermine them as effective political actors (Ross, 2002). Gill (2007) argues that there is nothing innocent about such representations and that they are part of an operation of power which trivialises the perspective of women and serves to keep them in their place. Recent work underpinned by the Black feminist concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1990) also demonstrates the extent to which media depictions can be even more problematic for women whose identity is at the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity. Women of colour in politics tend to be marginalised in news coverage and have their identity emphasised in sometimes problematic ways (Gershon, 2012; Ward, 2016). The advent of digital technologies means that women politicians have to deal with the demands not only of a digital news environment which appears to reflect mainstream print and broadcast patterns of representation (Harmer and Southern, forthcoming) but the demands of social media whereby they can be directly contacted by anyone and which offers increased opportunities for them to be discriminated against and othered online.

**Violence Against Women in Politics**

Despite the fact that women’s participation in formal politics has increased globally, this has been accompanied by another trend: the rise of violence *against* women in politics. Mona Lena Krook’s (2017) extensive review of this trend suggestions that this takes five forms: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, economic violence, and symbolic violence. She identifies a number of empirical studies from Sweden, Bolvia, Australia and the UK which suggest that sexist hostility and intimidation have driven female politicians out of politics. Krook demonstrates that the majority of definitions of violence against women highlight three basic elements. First, that it involves aggressive acts aimed largely or solely at women in politics. Secondly, that women are targeted via explicitly gendered means, for example the use or threat of sexual violence. And finally, that the goal is to deter participation of the targeted group in formal politics. Crucially, for our purposes, the concept of violence is not limited to physical manifestations. ‘Harassment’, ‘intimidation’ and ‘discrimination’ are also important because they draw attention to non-physical acts of aggression or resistance to women’s participation in politics. There are clear parallels here with the conceptualisation of online harassment and trolling as a form of symbolic violence (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017) whereby these behaviours act as ‘silencing strategies’ in order to discourage the recipients (and other people like them) from participating. Online harassment is a way of further excluding women and their voices from digital spaces (Megarry, 2014). As Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) point out the internet affords many opportunities to direct vitriol and violence toward women in online spaces. Furthermore, women of colour are particularly targeted since these forms of violence are not only misogynistic, but racist as well. Evidence suggests that women are more likely to be targets for online abuse and are less likely to be its authors (Jane, 2014). The findings from a number of studies further indicate that online attacks are aimed disproportionately at women, and in particular at women of colour or those advocating explicitly feminist messages (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Lewis et al, 2016). A plethora of misogynist tactics, such as trolling (Buckels et al, 2014; Shaw, 2016), making sexist ‘humorous’ comments (Jane, 2014; Fox et al., 2015), silencing (Garcia Favaro and Gill, 2016; Shaw, 2016), and tacit shaming strategies (Abraham, 2013), all attempt to silence women’s voices online and re-inscribe the internet as a place where women do not belong.

Whilst the anonymous nature of online interaction, the structures and policies of online platforms, and an insufficient legal framework for policing such behaviour are often seen as contributing factors, it is crucial not to lose sight of the deeply embedded social and cultural factors that legitimate the denigration of women. There is now an emerging body of work that seeks to measure and analyse the nature of online abuse and discrimination online. However much of this research assumes that this sexism is always aggressive or hostile. This is not always the case. As Fox et al. (2015) argue, one defence of online sexism is to dismiss it as merely a joke. They argue that regardless of tone, online sexism is pernicious and reinforces and normalises the idea that people are entitled to belittle and demean women. Regardless of the intentions of the culprit, the othering of women online can be detrimental to their status as equal participants in society. This is an important point for our analysis too, as we see that although few of the messages that women MPs received were abusive or misogynistic, they reinforce women’s outsider status in subtler and potentially enduring ways. This ‘ambient sexism’ can therefore impact on all women in politics, regardless of whether or not they have been individually targeted.

If we consider the realm of formal politics this becomes increasingly problematic because online violence ‘may operate in ways analogous to physical violence in excluding women from political life’ (Krook, 2017: 79), and as such ‘efforts to harm, intimidate and harass women should thus be seen as a serious threat and affront to democracy, rather than dismissed as an unfortunate feature of “politics as usual”’ (Krook, 2017: 75): or indeed social/digital media as usual, not least when female Members of Parliament have an obligation to communicate with those they represent, which may necessitate their use of social media to some degree. Therefore, efforts to restrict the participation of women online in these ways is deeply problematic and highlights the role that online othering can have in sending a broader and unambiguous message that women as a group do not belong in politics and/or on social media. Therefore, they may be at the very least at a political disadvantage if they do not make use of platforms like Twitter, or they may be seen as out of touch by voters who have a right to contact their elected representatives.

**Online Abuse of MPs: The Evidence So Far**

A growing number of recent studies have sought to examine the extent to which women MPs have been subjected to abuse online. In conjunction with *Buzzfeed News*, Greenwood et al. (2017) studied 840,000 tweets which were sent between 8 May 2017 and 8 June 2017 (one month before the last General Election in the UK). Their results suggest in general that the percentage of tweets that were likely to be seen as abusive made up between 2% and 4% of all tweets sent to politicians and that the overwhelming majority of insulting tweets were targeted at a relatively small number of prominent politicians. When the findings are broken down by political party and gender, male Conservative candidates received the highest percentage of abusive Tweets. They did however note that women candidates were more likely to receive abuse which was in some way gendered, such as referring to them as a ‘witch’ for example. Similarly, in their study of 270,000 tweets directed at MPs over a two and a half month period, Mcloughlin and Ward (forthcoming/ECPR paper) also found that the number of abusive tweets was relatively low with just 2.6% of tweets being coded as abusive. Furthermore, they noted that tweets which contained ‘hate speech’ were even rarer, with only 125 tweets (or 0.42%) being identified as such. They found that 62% of MPs had received at least one abusive tweet whereas only 6.6% of MPs received a speech containing hate speech). The results indicated that increased name-recognition of the MP has a positive relationship with increased levels of abusive tweets. When the results were broken down by gender, they found that men received more abusive tweets than women, however women received a significantly higher proportion of hate speech than men – 86% of tweets that contained hate speech were directed at women MPs. Stambolieva (2017) in contrast found that the vast majority of online abuse directed at politicians was aimed at women politicians. The study also revealed that one MP, Diane Abbott (the most prominent black woman in British public life) received almost half of all the abuse that was featured in the study and that another women of colour Tasmina Ahmed-Skeikh (a member of the Scottish Parliament) was the second most abused politician. Krook (2017) highlights that women who are younger or who belong to racial or ethnic minorities seem particularly susceptible to being targeted.

Whilst these studies give some indication of the extent to which Members of Parliament receive abusive messages on Twitter, this does not tell us the whole story. As Fox et al. (2015) make clear, sexist and racist content does not necessarily have to be explicitly hostile or abusive. Sexism and racism can be subtler, yet no less pernicious, way of othering women online in order to undermine them and remind others that they do not belong in the political realm. Since the studies discussed above tend to use automated software to perform a basic sentiment analysis, we argue that this means that subtler forms of othering will not be identified with these particular methods. For the purposes of this study we have employed a qualitative analysis in order to explore the extent to which MPs who are women of colour, identify as LBGT+ and/or have disabilities are othered on Twitter.

**Methods**

The study focuses on a small sample of political representatives from the UK parliament. In order to analyse the ways that women politicians are othered and discriminated against on Twitter, we chose to sample the Tweets sent directly to women MPs who have two or more characteristics that are traditionally under-represented in parliament such as women Black, Asian or minority ethnic, women who are LGBT+ and women who have a known disability. Of the MPs included in the analysis, nine were gay or bisexual women and 23 were black or other minority ethnic women. There is only one MPs who has three intersecting characteristics- Marsha de Cordova, who is a black woman who also has a disability. A full list of the women included in the analysis, and their characteristics are included in Table One.

These criteria resulted in the identification of 33 currently serving MPs. We collected the tweets over the course of a week between 6th June 2018 and 12th June 2018 inclusive because we were particularly interested in the everyday interactions that MPs have with members of the public rather than messages they might receive during particularly high profile political events such as elections. We used NodeXL software to scrape and download the tweets. This software allows users to scrape 7 days of tweets directed at whichever accounts are specified. We then removed any tweets where the MP in question had been included as a result of multiple replies, so that we focused only on tweets which were directly aimed at the MP. This resulted in 12,436 tweets. The MP with the most tweets sent to her was Joanna Cherry – 1697 tweets in total. The MP with fewest tweets was Valeria Vaz with 14 tweets. The tweets were then analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We read each tweet and inductively coded them in order to determine if and how these MPs were othered online. We then worked these codes up into themes by analysing which were the most prevalent trends in the data. We have chosen not to anonymise the tweets so that the extent to which women MPs experience online othering is discussed overtly. A number of these women have spoken publicly about their experiences of online abuse and we believe it is desirable to identify these instances clearly so that the extent of the abuse is known.

Table 1: List of MPs selected plus their intersecting characteristics and party

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Lesbian / Bisexual** | **BAME** | **Have a Disability** | **Party** |
| **Margot James** | 1 | 0 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Justine Greening** | 1 | 0 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Helen Grant** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Priti Patel** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Kemi Badenoch** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Nusrat Ghani** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Suella Fernandes** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Seema Kennedy** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Conservative |
| **Angela Eagle** | 1 | 0 | 0 | Labour |
| **Cat Smith** | 1 | 0 | 0 | Labour |
| **Nia Griffiths** | 1 | 0 | 0 | Labour |
| **Dawn Butler** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Diane Abbott** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Rushashana Ali** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Lisa Nandy** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Chi Onwuhra** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Yasmin Qureshi** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Naz Shah** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Rosena Allin Kahn** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Marsha de Cordova** | 0 | 1 | 1 | Labour |
| **Preet Gill** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Valerie Vaz** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Seema Malhorta** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Thangam Debonaire** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Rupa Huq** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Kate Osamore** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Fiona Onasanya** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Eleanor Smith** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Labour |
| **Layla Moran** | 0 | 1 | 0 | Liberal Democrat |
| **Mhairi Black** | 1 | 0 | 0 | SNP |
| **Angela Crawley** | 1 | 0 | 0 | SNP |
| **Hannah Bardell** | 1 | 0 | 0 | SNP |
| **Joanna Cherry** | 1 | 0 | 0 | SNP |

**Findings**

Four themes were identified within the data. Firstly, gendered and racist abuse were the most explicit examples of othering that we observed. The second theme were tweets that were not necessarily abusive but either attempted to silence women MPs or were somehow dismissive of them and their ideas. The third theme includes subtler forms of othering that whilst not overtly gendered, sought to question the intelligence or qualifications and credentials of the recipients in order to suggest that they do not belong in political life. The final, somewhat unexpected theme was what we have called ‘benevolent’ othering where despite tweeters seeming to heap praise or positive evaluations on women MPs, the tweets themselves still othered the recipients in problematic ways that reinforced their perceived difference from normative ideas of political representatives. In our analysis of each theme we have kept the original spelling and format of the tweets in question. In places we have added some notes in brackets to aid clarity.

***Gendered and Racist Abuse***

The first theme includes examples where tweeters directed gendered and/or racist abuse at the woman concerned. These ranged from sexualised comments or comments about the appearance of the MP, to outright insults:

'@lisanandy Do you like rimming?’

'@lisanandy is sexiest female Member of Parliament’

The first example directly addresses the MP in question and asks her a sexualised question whilst the second tweet is an unsolicited comment about her perceived attractiveness which directly objectifies her. These forms of gendered comments are completely unrelated to the work that women MPs do, and yet they subtly remind the recipient - and indeed anyone else observing the message - that women should be perceived as being women first and MPs second. This phenomenon seems like a continuation of mainstream news coverage which makes women MPs feel uncomfortable for focusing on their appearance rather than their political record (see Ross, 2002).

Women MPs also received Tweets which chastised them for their appearance:

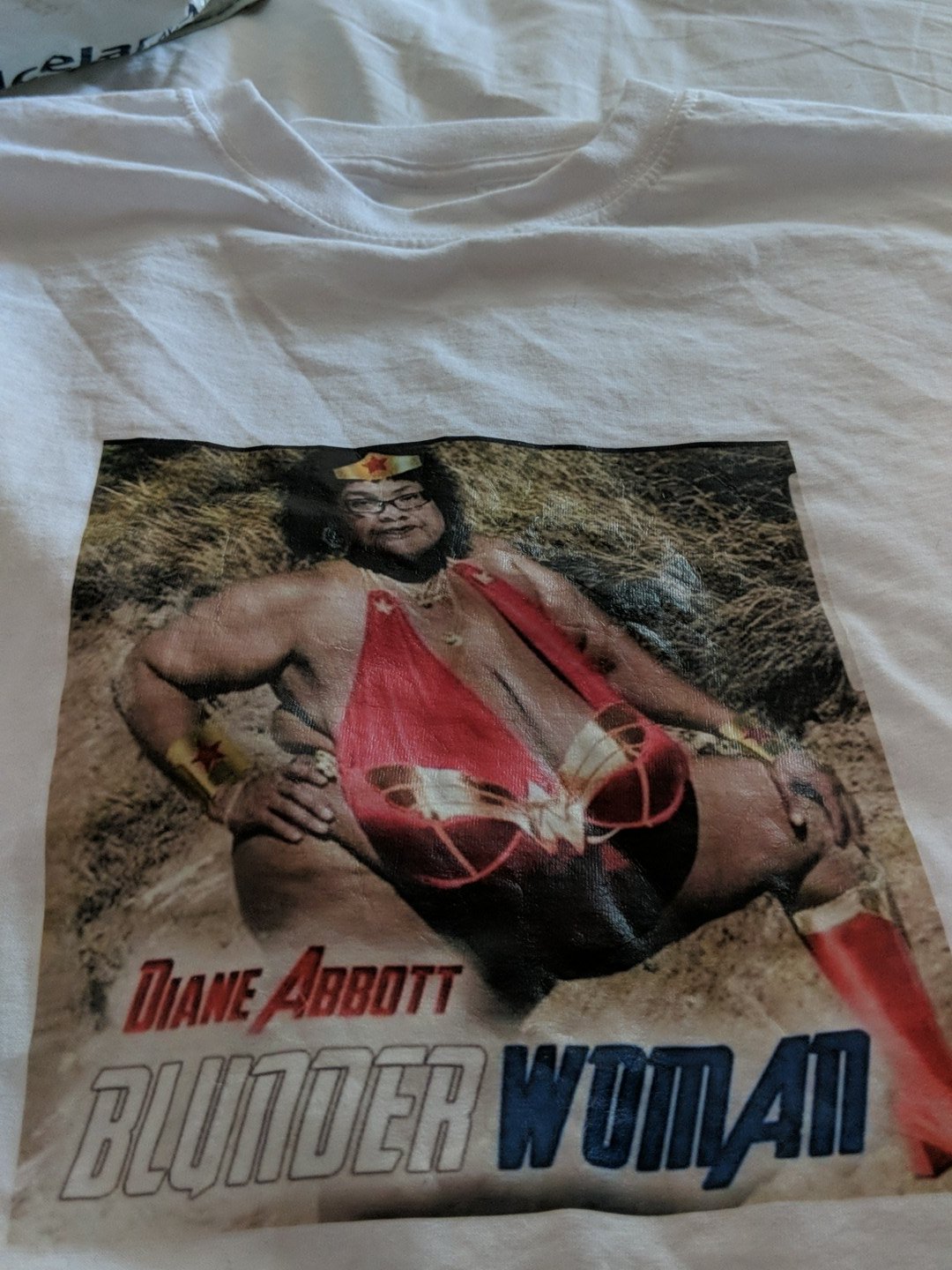
'@DrRosena Wow… do you ever want attention. Your poor husband.’

@patel4witham You’ve got fat!!’

The first example accuses the MP in question of deliberately cultivating her own appearance in order to attract attention from men and implies that she is not fulfilling her traditional role as a wife. The second example overtly criticises the MP for having gained weight. These two examples demonstrate a double bind as far as women MPs are concerned. They are not supposed to be concerned with their appearance yet they receive criticism when they do not. This once again mirrors mainstream media discourses around the appearance of women politicians (Ross, 2002).

Abuse was also evident from images that were attached to some tweets. One featured a picture aimed at Diane Abbott with her face photo-shopped onto the body of a black model in a very revealing Wonder Woman outfit. The model was significantly larger in size than Abbott is herself, so we infer this was supposed to be insulting to her appearance. It was emblazoned with the legend ‘Blunder Woman’ which appears to be a reference to a so-called ‘car crash interview’ she gave during the 2017 election in which she misquoted some statistics about police funding (Harmer and Southern, forthcoming). As well as insulting her size, this image also appears to question her intelligence and political efficacy (which we will discuss in detail later).

Figure 1: Picture Posted Towards Diane Abbott



Given what we already know about the nature of online abuse directed at women MPs, it is unsurprising that the most egregious examples of othering in our research were directed at women of colour (see Stambolieva, 2017). A number of these Tweets were abusive:

'@RupaHuq So your against the people #thickbitch’

‘@HackneyAbbott you are fucking trash. Carl Benjamin [a prominent alt-right YouTuber also known as Sargon of Akkad] is NOT far right, you fucking commie whore.’

Both Tweets contain examples of gendered insults: ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’. They also both seem to be taking issue with the political opinion or perspective of both MPs. The first indicts Rupa Huq as undemocratic whilst the other accuses Diane Abbott of being a communist. Given that Twitter is used by politicians to communicate with constituents and the wider public about their political work this is not surprising, but the uncivil and abusive nature of the criticism demonstrates the extent to which communicating on social media as an elected representative can be very unpleasant. Furthermore, some of the Tweets also contained explicitly racist insults:

'@RupaHuq carry on apu’ [reference to an Indian character from *The Simpson’s*]

‘@HackneyAbbott You fucking niggers are the racist. You fucks have to move to white societies to survive. You fucking walking tuna can.’

‘@NazShahBfd Are you not even a little embarrassed supporting rapists? I know the corann encourages such behaviour but still children?!?!?! Time to adopt a more civilised stance’

Here three different women of colour are subjected to openly racist insults. Rupa Huq is compared to a well-known Indian character from the US television series *The Simpson’s* (whose portrayal by a white voice artist has itself become more controversial in recent years). The other two examples feature explicitly racist abuse. The first uses a well-known racial slur which hardly needs explanation, whilst the final example is explicitly Islamophobic and accuses Naz Shah of being ‘uncivilised’ and supporting child rapists due to her Muslim faith. These somewhat extreme examples taken from a routine week demonstrate the extent to which women of colour who are MPs have to deal with abuse on a regular basis.

An element of the tweets which we found interesting involved mainly white men, as far as could be discerned from their profiles (which has been showed to be accurate to a fair degree, see Slone et al. 2013) calling black and minority ethnic female MPs racist:

@HackneyAbbott Diane Abbott is a racist Neo-Nazi.’

@NazShahBfd still wondering about that RT of yours "shut up for the sake of diversity" was it??? Are you a racist?’

@NazShahBfd No one cares what you think!! Resign Racist!!’

‘@NazShahBfd Your to (sic) racist to say who the culprits are. Think of the paki grooming, thousand of white babies raped by pakistani, animals!’

This is a particularly pernicious form of abuse. Both women have spoken of the racism they have encountered in their roles and to have this turned back on them seems particularly cruel. We would also argue that these examples can be seen as a strategy of punishing these women for speaking out against racism and as an attempt to silence them from doing this in the future, by trivialising their experiences and denigrating the seriousness of this form of abuse on social media. Strikingly, the fact that women of colour received far more negative and abusive messages in our sample is yet another trend that is reflected in mainstream news coverage of politics (see Ward, 2016; 2017) where minority women are more likely to receive negative coverage which highlights their gender than their white counterparts.

***Dismissal and Silencing***

Some of the messages that make up this theme contained explicitly gendered language, but there were a distinct group of tweets which were merely dismissive of what the MPs tweeted about. Some of these tweets were in response to serious issues such as Brexit or the Grenfell tragedy, topics which MPs would be expected to comment on as part of their job. The fact that those commenting on such topics are told they are ‘boring’, to ‘calm down’ and to ‘get a grip’ is evidence that women MPs are subjected to attempts to put them in their place or silence them in some way:

‘@RupaHuq We are leaving sorry so calm down dear’

'@angelaeagle @Imi\_Ahmed Get a grip dear.’

These examples demonstrate the way in which women MPs are patronised in some of the tweets. Telling a woman to ‘calm down’ or ‘get a grip’ implies that she is being overly emotional and irrational playing into traditional ideas of the hysterical woman who is unfit for public office. Other tweets that can be characterised as dismissive sought to inform the recipients that they are boring or unoriginal:

'@KemiBadenoch you are a joke’

'@joannaccherry Stick with the day job love....’

‘@DrRosena You’re boring’

'@CatSmithMP Who gives a sh\*t.’

'@HackneyAbbott Give it a rest. Boring’

The first example tries to trivialise the MP in question by telling her that she is not to be taken seriously. The second example comes with the same patronising tone as the previous set of examples. Referring to her as ‘love’ also trivialises her. A similar but more extreme behaviour to the dismissal exhibited in the tweets was silencing. Tweets that did this explicitly tried to silence the MP in question. Although some of the dismissive tweets verged on silencing, these ones openly called for the women to stop talking:

@NazShahBfd It’s such a shame that you get a voice, especially when you champion silencing the most vulnerable.’

'@RupaHuq I much prefer your sister tbh keeps her mouth shut’

'@HannahB4LiviMP god your boring. Shut up 💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤💤’ [Z’s to represent a snoring sound]

@CatSmithMP You are still harping on about this nonsense, instead of living in the real world’.

Much has been written about the ways in which internet trolls and online abuse are efforts to silence women and prevent them from participating (Jane, 2014; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017) including in this volume (see for instance Chapters 3 and 4). This is problematic but could be considered even more so when the women who are being silenced are elected representatives in a democratic setting who have an obligation and right to discuss politics in the public sphere as it poses questions about how they are supposed to perform their function as representatives in such as hostile setting.

***Questioning Intelligence and Position***

The place of women in positions of authority is often indirectly undermined in various ways. One is by questioning their suitability to hold office. Several tweets called the women in question stupid or questioned their intelligence. The inference here is that she is not fit to be in charge and furthermore is undeserving of the power she might hold. Some of these were fairly benign or seemed to be more generally aimed at all elected officials:

'@RupaHuq Thought I tweeted some stupid stuff but this is bollox’

'@lisanandy The absolute state of your grammar.’

@RupaHuq Some proper thick MP's... Remind me again how you were elected’

Here elected politicians were referred to as stupid and therefore not intelligent enough to be an MP and had their typos and grammatical errors pointed out and judged. These attempts to undermine women MPs’ intellect and abilities in a public forum are problematic because they rely on sexist stereotypes in order portray them as unqualified for political office. Once again, this is a trope that has been identified in mainstream news discourses about women MPs (Harmer et al, 2017). Other examples verged on or were outright abusive:

‘@HackneyAbbott Must be joking who takes clown Abbott seriously’

‘@HackneyAbbott Your brain is made of mush woman 😡’

@RupaHuq Are you FUCKING stupid?’

@lisanandy hammer tongued tard’ [short for ‘retard’].

The final example is particularly problematic given the use of slur ‘tard’, a shortened version of ‘retard’ which is an ableist slur. Although Lisa Nandy has not publically disclosed being affected by a disability, the Tweet by implication reinforces the notion that people with intellectual disabilities do not belong in public office. There were also several examples of tweets which questioned the numerical skills of Diane Abbott, presumably in the wake of the difficult interviews she had during the election (discussed earlier):

'@HackneyAbbott Think you got the sums wrong again’

'@HackneyAbbott More your (sic) dodgy arithmetic’

'@HackneyAbbott what’s 2X2 ?’

'@HackneyAbbott But at least they can count.’

'@HackneyAbbott Learn to count’

'@HackneyAbbott @FinancialTimes Hmm someone check her maths, knowing diane it could be just 6 people’

The tweets direct patronising sums towards her and imply that she is unable to do even basic arithmetic. The fact that Abbott is still being reminded of one single incident from over a year ago where she made a mistake, shows the higher price women pay for making mistakes as politicians. It has been noted by the authors elsewhere that similar interviews by men, whereby they forgot the costing for certain policies were not framed in such a condemnatory manner, even men from the same party as Abbot (Harmer and Southern, forthcoming).

Linked to these suggestions that the recipients are unqualified and incapable is the idea that these women are not fit for political office or that they were somehow elected for spurious reasons. This demonstrates yet another way in which othering can work to undermine under-represented groups by questioning their right to be in power. There were several examples or this. Some questioned how the women had been elected or had held onto their position:

‘@NazShahBfd Are you still an MP, get back under your stone you horrible example of a human for the sake of #diversity’

'@HackneyAbbott Abbott how you got where you are is beyond belief you really are not fit to be in parliament’

'@HackneyAbbott I'll say it again when r u going to retire please soon’

'@HackneyAbbott Neither are you dear [in response to a Tweet where Abbot said social housing was ‘not fit for purpose’].

The first example explicitly suggests that Naz Shah was only elected due to politically correct ideas about the importance of a diverse set of representatives to advocate for all members of a multicultural society. In fact, there are no formal quota system in operation to elect British politicians of any level but the tweet simply chooses to argue that this must be the only reason she was elected. This is a clear attempt to undermine her position which not only denigrates the MP who is referred to here but all women MPs, particularly women from under-represented groups. The subsequent examples all accuse Diane Abbott of being unfit for office or ask when she is leaving. These explicit suggestions that these MPs do not belong in politics is not only extremely problematic but also to some extent reflects mainstream news discourses which position women, and women of colour in particular as outsiders (Ward, 2016). A number of the Tweets also sought to imply these women were not carrying out their duties as MPs sufficiently, or could not do it without additional help from other people:

'@FionaOnasanyaMP what have you ever done for us constituents?’

@MhairiBlack planning on turning up for work anytime soon?!’

@ MhairiBlack maybe if you ever did any work’

‘@KateOsamor Without help you’re a waste of space’

These examples are of interest because they are purporting to be holding MPs to account for their job performance which they of course have a right to do as political constituents however it is unclear from the tweets to what extent such claims are warranted. Mhairi Black has spoken out about a period of illness which have meant she has been unable to attend parliament whereby MPs from another party accused her of being lazy. The tone of the final three tweets is also somewhat uncivil. Remarkably, despite the hostile atmosphere in Diane Abbott’s mentions, one user accused her of neglecting her political responsibilities by not responding to the tweets that had been directed towards her:

'@HackneyAbbott she never replies to anyone, her minions Tweet. Too important to talk to the likes of us’

This further shows the difficult position female MPs (and particularly women of colour) are in. It is likely that Abbott does not respond or even look at replies due to sheer volume of messages she must receive as a prominent shadow-cabinet minister, let alone when the kind of responses she often gets (which have been documented in this chapter) are take into account. However, this is portrayed as a dereliction of her duties by some and no doubt perpetuates the idea that she is not a fit representative. Recipients of online abuse are often told not to ‘feed the trolls’ but this is clearly more difficult for elected officials. Another set of tweets appeared to question whether the MP in question had actually done certain work themselves. A number of tweets aimed at Kate Osamore asked her repeatedly whether she had done certain tasks herself:

‘@KateOsamor Which speech are you ripping off?’

‘@KateOsamor Did you write this teeet all by yourself or nick it?’

This is likely in response to a political blogpost by right-wing blogger Guido Fawkes which claims Osamore plagiarised her maiden speech in the House of Commons from Wikipedia and from a previous speech by Barack Obama (*Guido Fawkes*, 22 May 2018). In a similar way to the many messages ridiculing Diane Abbot’s arithmetic above, it seems that the errors of women of colour MPs are repeatedly brought up time and again in order to remind them that they do not belong in positions of power.

***‘Benevolent’ Othering***

The final theme that we identified in the data was somewhat unexpected. Marsha de Cordova MP was included in the sample due to her identity as a woman of colour but also because she is visually impaired. In stark contrast to the other women of colour whose tweets we analysed, de Cordova’s were almost all very positive in tone. Several of them called her inspirational:

@MarshadeCordova @LeeFashoda @daily\_politics Wonderful and very inspiring !’

@MarshadeCordova @actforchangehq @daily\_politics What an inspiration!!’

@MarshadeCordova @daily\_politics Keep up good work Ms Cordova. You're an inspiration.’

@MarshadeCordova @jeremycorbyn @daily\_politics We need more people like you spreading inspiration and hope. Thank you for sharing😊’

@MarshadeCordova @LeeFashoda @daily\_politics Wonderful and very inspiring !’

These Tweets appeared to be referencing a television appearance, where amongst other topics, she discussed the challenges of being visually impaired in Parliament. We have termed this theme ‘benevolent’ othering because although the tweeters are clearly attempting to compliment de Cordova for overcoming some of these challenges, the Tweets still foreground a way she is different, not only to their expectations of MPs, but also in terms of her colleagues. Disability studies scholars call this ‘inspiration porn’ whereby disability is represented as a desirable but undesired characteristic (Grue, 2016: 838). This means impairment is portrayed as a visually or symbolically distinct biophysical deficit in one person that must be overcome through the display of physical prowess.’ So, although de Cordova is just going about her usual political duties in the same way as her colleagues, depicting her achievements as inspirational actually implies that people with impairments are perceived as having a smaller scope for achievement than able-bodied colleagues, which may well be just as problematic as some of the more overtly aggressive forms of othering already discussed. The implications are that her visual impairment is an individual problem that need to be overcome by her efforts rather than yet more evidence that the everyday conduct of politics is exclusionary.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of a week of replies to 33 women MPs on Twitter revealed a myriad of different ways in which these women were othered. We identified four main themes. Firstly, explicitly gendered and racist abuse which were the most overt examples of othering that we observed. These tweets sexualised women MPs, insulted their appearance and were explicitly racist and Islamophobic, demonstrating the extent to which women in politics are subjected to serious forms of hate speech on an everyday basis. The second theme were tweets that were not necessarily openly abusive but either attempted to silence women MPs or were somehow dismissive of them and their ideas. Such tweets openly called for the MPs in question to shut up. The third theme which is somewhat related, includes subtler forms of othering that whilst they were not overtly gendered still sought to question the intelligence or qualifications and credentials of the recipients, in order to suggest that they do not belong in political life. The tweets accused women MPs of being stupid or lacking the experience and intelligence needed for participation in politics. These tweets serve to demonstrate the extent to which women are still seen as lacking the necessary skills and qualifications for political office. The final, somewhat unexpected theme was what we have called ‘benevolent’ othering where despite tweeters seeming to heap praise or positive evaluations on women MPs, the tweets themselves still othered the recipients in problematic ways that reinforced their perceived difference from normative ideas of political representatives, in this case the tweets sought to frame Marsha de Cordova’s ability to be an MP whilst having a visual impairment as ‘inspirational’. It is striking that our analysis failed to identify any significant othering which sought to denigrate the sexuality of women MPs despite our sampling strategy. This might be a result of the particular week we analysed as LGBT+ MPs have complained of being victimised with homophobic slurs.

These themes are particularly interesting for two reasons. First, there appears to be a real symmetry between the forms of othering that takes place on Twitter and the ways in which mainstream news coverage has been portraying women MPs in news discourses demonstrating that there is a good deal of continuity in the relationship between women, media and politics. Secondly, the fact that there was so much over just the course of a week suggest that this is a common problem. Over time, it is likely that even the subtler uncivil othering would become a burdensome experience for these representatives. Some of the women in the sample did not receive any replies which could be considered uncivil or abusive but this does not negate the othering directed at their colleagues and does not mean that they do not receive such messages themselves.

There is evidence from a broad range of countries including Sweden, Bolivia, Australia and the UK that suggest sexist hostility and intimidation have driven some female politicians out of politics. Therefore, if their everyday interactions with constituents and the mainstream media are filled with negative and abusive messages which question their right and ability to participate in formal politics, it seems reasonable to suggest that this could act as yet another barrier that might deter women from seeking election or may drive women who experience it out of politics after being elected. Although these might not always lead to physical attacks, the online othering of women from under-represented groups in particular is extremely problematic. As Krook (2017) suggests this is not just a problem for social media sites and the police but is in actuality an affront to democracy if democratically elected representatives continue to be undermined in this way during the course of carrying out their jobs.

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