

Violence and Harassment Against Women in Politics is Nothing New. It's Past Time We Do Something About it.

By A'shanti Gholar

Earlier this month, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer [declared that she would not be intimidated](#) after law enforcement officials foiled a plot by militia groups to kidnap her and overthrow the state government. The men who were arrested planned to target her because of the actions she took to get the COVID-19 pandemic under control and to keep her constituents safe.

While the story has now largely disappeared from the national news cycle, it hasn't stopped. Just days ago, Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego was [allegedly threatened](#) by a police officer. These cases are a reminder that there are still dangers out there for women who seek and who are in positions of power.

Women have become more visible over the last few election cycles, running for office at unprecedented rates. Since 2016, it's become clear that women of all backgrounds are ready to step off the sidelines to steer our country in the right direction. That momentum has only built during the past few years including the historic 2018 midterm election when voters elected the highest number of women to ever serve in Congress and ushered in the first-ever majority-woman state legislature in Nevada.

But among the moments of celebration, there have also been stories of harassment and threats that women candidates had to navigate while leading their communities. Although many women have fought back, some have reported that they did not feel safe on the campaign trail. Abuse against women in the political sphere is certainly nothing new, but with the advent of social media, the issue has become particularly insidious and hard to combat. As more women run to reach parity at every level of government, there has never been greater urgency to do something about it. And in a time of heightened political fear and violent rhetoric toward women, and especially women of color, we've got to call it out, take action against it and elect more women.

A recent study found that on average, women politicians deal with [12% more abuse on Facebook than their male](#) counterparts. Researchers also found that mentions of elected women leaders on Twitter "contained abuse [between 15% and 39%](#) of the time," which is markedly higher than for men. A separate study also showed that the chances of a woman being on the receiving end of '[psychological electoral violence](#)' was three times greater than for a man. Many of these attacks against women are often sexualized, and they undoubtedly take a toll on the mental health of women who have to endure them.

The problem is even worse for women of color who sometimes face both racialized and sexualized abuse. Amnesty International, which considers [targeted abuse and harassment against women a human rights issue](#), conducted a crowdsourced study to analyze the abuse of

women on Twitter. They found that [Black and Latinx women were targeted more](#) than any other group. Women of color were [30 percent more likely](#) to experience harassment and the numbers were especially staggering for Black women, who were [more than 80% more likely](#) to be targeted.

The abuse and harassment are also not limited to social media. Congresswoman Jahana Hayes recently shared that a Zoom call hosted by her office [was hijacked by trolls who carried out a coordinated racist attack](#). Unfortunately, what Rep. Hayes experienced happens all too often. For some women, the risk to their lives becomes imminent and they are forced to choose between their passion for public service and personal safety.

In 2018, Oregon House Representative Janelle Bynum had the [police called](#) on her while knocking doors and canvassing in her own community.

Former Vermont State Representative Kiah Morris [had to step down following a barrage of racism and sexism](#) during her campaign that escalated into a break-in at her home. Others [don't make it through the campaign](#) and must drop out before election day. This is not sustainable if we ever plan to create a more inclusive democracy.

Being in the public eye and running for political office does leave candidates, both men and women, open to scrutiny. There is a place for disagreement, civil discourse and passionate debate. But we cannot normalize this type of abuse and harassment against women and we must recognize that we all have a role to play in stopping it.

At both Emerge and EMILY's List, we provide one part of the solution: training and preparing more women to run for office. But, we must all do more to encourage and support women during their campaigns. Women have made incredible progress up and down the ballot but remain underrepresented. Electing more women normalizes their presence in places of power.

The day before the only Vice Presidential debate of the 2020 election, TIME'S UP released a report showing that a quarter of the coverage of Sen. Kamala Harris included "[racist and sexist stereotyping and tropes](#)." These vicious and dehumanizing attacks are unacceptable and have no place in our political discourse. Senator Harris and other qualified women in elected office or seeking it, by their very existence, challenge what it means to a stereotypical political leader.

When more women are serving in office, it gives them more influence to shape policies that address problems like online abuse. Evidence shows that women legislators are highly effective at passing critical legislation on issues that previously failed to gain traction. If more women are at the table, they can do more to protect all women across the country.

In the words of trailblazing Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, women should not be punished with violence and abuse for doing their jobs. Our movement to change the face of politics is not going away and women will continue to take up space, so we all better get used to it.

