

Abuse and intimidation of our elected representatives, including violence towards them and their families is one of the biggest threats to our democracy in the UK and this is predominantly directed at women and ethnic minorities. There is little support from wider services to protect our Members

As a former Cllr I became a target for death threats, misinformation and abuse when I stood out against cruel sports and fox hunting some time ago so I know only too well how unpleasant life can be when your home, your family and your family pets are threatened. And when you are an elected member in a small community, your opposing voice to one subject matter can create such extreme responses from others. However, being such a small community, individuals can become personal and their hostility frighteningly disproportionate.

In my own Community Council, due to unacceptable abuse and intimidation directed at one of our Members, most of the Community Council stepped down in support of our female Chair against what had become a toxic campaign orchestrated by just a few in the area against her. The relentless misogyny and persecution of our Chair by a small but vocal minority enabled relentless bullying. Over a number of around 3 years, this one individual from the community had been found guilty of an affray, was subject to a restraining order and more recently was convicted of a criminal offence for assault by beating, at Cwmbran Magistrates Court, for punching our Chair's partner resulting in all but two Cllrs stepping away from elected office. Giving their time freely and committing their time to community activity is not just a thankless task, which you tend to expect, but it seems also comes with considerable risk.

For her own safety and she said *'to protect Council from further disruption'* the Chair resigned and stepped back out of public office. She said she had decided some while ago that certain individuals were using her position as Chair as access to her and was being used as a tool to persecute her so stepping back would deny them that access. In support of our Chair and the amazing work she had achieved in the short time she had been part of the Council, everyone acknowledged her valuable contribution to the area. She unjustly endured physical, verbal and mental abuse from a small section of the community, she has been subjected to relentless harassment and her partner was physically assaulted resulting in the recent conviction of the perpetrator. A Member in support of our Chair said that "the community should be ashamed of themselves, firstly that vocal minority repeating defamatory remarks about the Chair on behalf of the perpetrator enabling the persecution and relentless bullying of an elected Member dutifully undertaking their role in Public Office. And secondly, the silent minority who failed to stand out against such disgusting behaviour. This Council, its Members and its officers have done more for these villages than any other council and that success is mostly down to female Elected Members. Those Members now stepping back in support of the Chair is now a huge loss to the whole area.

This unacceptable behaviour by some in our society is becoming a barrier to those considering running for election. Women are confronted by misogyny, sexism and relentless bullying that does not seem to be directed at Male Elected Members. It has implications for the representation we see in UK politics, as female politicians and those from minority ethnic

backgrounds receive disproportionate levels of abuse.

Without urgent action, we risk going backwards on this issue. It was hoped that the tragedy of Jo Cox's murder would be a wake-up call and that abuse and intimidation in public life would be taken seriously and addressed. Seven years on, the problem appears to be worsening. MPs and local councillors alike frequently recount horrific and traumatic threats. I stepped down because of threats to my, my family's and my pets lives and threats to my property. Our Chair has also done the same and this is what women face from the still very prevalent misogyny that exists within our communities.

Sir David Amess' tragic murder in 2021 highlights the ongoing risk of violence. The Jo Cox Foundation was set up to protect our democracy for future generations. Sadly, to protect herself from further attacks and to protect the physical and mental health and wellbeing of herself and her family she has stepped back to remove one area of access those perpetrators have been using to harass and abuse her. This was a very sad day for democracy.

Sadly, it is no better in the Political parties where sexism and misogyny are prevalent when it comes to the sharing of power and influence.

There are far too many non-professionals, non-skilled background individuals in key positions of authority or influence, and I think that when you're running a Political party with a view to lead the country, then you need robust and appropriate governance for that. This isn't an elitist comment but a capability one. From my experience, my party has been shown not to have it. It's greatly disappointing because that's just basic good governance in any organisation yet too many people are elected to positions on (or influenced by) who they know, who they are related to or their special time-served friendships. Constructive criticism isn't accepted gracefully, instead, all too often it excludes those women who speak out and they are considered not just as outspoken, but also labelled as troublemakers, certainly not about ability or fair play.

I've witnessed what can only be described as a far cry from civility and respect and when you seek to call out bullying and oppressive behaviour as a woman you are singled out as troublemakers, just shut down or discouraged so much so that women inevitably leave the field of politics altogether, as I did and as have other women I have spoken to.

In my limited view from local experience, Female members are not valued. Misogyny is evident in its many forms from discrimination, objectification, prejudice, and clear and blatant sexism.

Disciplinary panels appear poorly equipped to hear cases. I'm not even clear on how panels are selected or if they are selected through a fair and transparent process with clear terms of reference. There certainly doesn't seem to be a methodology used or consistency employed in their process to protect all involved. I also don't believe they understand how to investigate claims in a way that can be seen as transparent and impartial with their own accountability open to scrutiny. It's almost as if it's more about 'how can we make this go away' than how can we genuinely tackle the issue.

I don't feel we have a valued voice or if our voice is heard it's treated with defensiveness and/or shut down or ignored. There's a lack of a genuine share of leadership here in the local constituencies where places are dished out on who's 'in' and who is going to say the 'right' things creating an echo chamber.

It's a sad place that when you challenge inappropriate and discriminatory language and

behaviour you are asked 'what's your agenda'?! or accused of being toxic! We shouldn't shut down the potential for richness and innovation by only listening to a few or by allowing only those that agree to speak.

Constructive criticism is often the only way we learn about our weaknesses, without it we can't improve. When we're dismissive and defensive, instead of being accepting and gracious, we are at risk of missing out on important insight, richness and innovation that comes with diverse thought, ideas and talent.

Diversity and inclusion are the foundation of creativity which should be embraced. Diversity of thought comes from all walks of life with different experiences and backgrounds. If diverse viewpoints are listened to, the outcome is always better.

One of the major mistakes made by those investigating complaints made by those that speak up for change but experience bullying for doing so is to imply that the target is in some way responsible for the situation. Those investigating do this by asking the target whether they did anything to provoke the bullying or what they might do to resolve the situation!!!! reinforcing the belief that in some way the target of their bullying was at fault rather than acknowledging that bullying is totally inappropriate and unacceptable behaviour.

M

mediation in these circumstances is also totally ineffective because it focuses on relationship issues, and bullying is NOT a relationship issue but a behaviour issue.

The quantitative data will always show the disparity in the lack of women's participation but tie that into the compelling qualitative data on women disillusioned by men with existing influence and power and you can see why they step away!

Research already shows that Women are less likely to become local councillors because they are less likely than men to be political party members. So, when women come into a Party they should not be confronted by male figures, patronising them or excluding them or they will simply just walk away, again perpetuating that fact.

While selection processes are largely formal and determined by party rules, at the local level these can be informal and shaped by individuals, networks, environment and culture. Culture is very much how it is shaped in my small area in Wales.

It's impossible to assess how well parties are doing in supporting women to be selected as candidates because very little or no evidence is collected or made public by political parties on the number of women coming forward to be selected as a councillor.

Parties should be responsible for collecting and publishing data on the representation of women and protected groups in relation to party membership, as well as the initial recruitment and selection of candidates for local government

And if we miss the opportunity for diversity then we miss the richness that can be derived from new ideas, new experiences and diverse skills and knowledge.

We have lost a valid voice of an intelligent, dynamic and driven woman in Public Office because of Misogyny and sexism and the lack of support provided to women in Public Office.

Jayne