

The high cost of online attacks against women

26 January 2021, by Taylor McNeil



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When Parkland, Fla., high school student Emma Gonzalez spoke forcefully against gun violence in 2018 after the mass shooting at her high school, the video of her plea went viral. She received acclaim and hundreds of thousands of followers on social media. But soon she was bombarded by hateful, violent invective that didn't focus so much on her strong anti-gun views as on her gender, race, and sexual orientation.

That kind of response is not unusual—and it's been happening more and more, says Sarah Sobieraj, a professor of sociology and author of the recently published "Credible Threat: Attacks Against Women Online and the Future of Democracy."

Unless efforts are made to rein in these often-anonymous attacks on [women](#), the effect will be chilling, she says, eliminating voices from debates on wide-ranging issues that affect us all. The net result, she fears, is a loss to democracy in America.

Sobieraj's research focuses on "political voice and visibility in the United States and how they are shaped by the interventions of the media," she says. The author of "Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism" and "[The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility](#)," co-written with Tufts political scientist Jeffrey Berry, Sobieraj became interested in what happens when people use new technologies to speak out.

"There's this idea that it's democratizing, but at the same time, I kept hearing these stories about women being attacked online," she says. That led to research for the new book, talking in-depth with 52 women who have been on the receiving end of abuse from strangers based on their identities. The result is chilling look at abuse that is focused on women who speak publicly about everything from politics to gaming.

Tufts Now recently spoke with Sobieraj to learn more about the online attacks against women, what they mean for America, and what can be done about them.

Tufts Now: Who is being subject to these anonymous online attacks?

Sarah Sobieraj: Initially, I thought it was feminist women or those who were talking about topics like sexual assault, for example. But it wasn't that. All you had to do is be a woman speaking in public; I started finding all these stories about women who were speaking publicly about very non-scandalous or controversial issues and were still being attacked.

What really struck me when I started looking at this in depth was the way that gender—and identity more broadly—is the weapon that's used in the attacks themselves. It's not talk about ideas. A tremendous amount of the pushback is about women's bodies—their appearance, their sexual behavior—and

the abuse is filled with identity-based stereotypes and epithets.

Are the kinds of attacks you see different for men than women?

For another piece of research, I looked at patterns of abuse in tweets directed at legislators, broken down based on their gender and race. The abuse directed at men is different. It's not polite, certainly, or we wouldn't be calling it abuse, but it does not have the same tenor. It doesn't focus as much on their identity as evidence that what they have to say is not of value.

Obviously, if you're on the receiving end of this, it's really hard, but it also serves to silence people.

There's a woman in the book who, after six years of online abuse, left the country and changed her name. There's another woman who, at the time I interviewed her, when she gave public talks would have to be accompanied by dogs sniffing for IEDs—improvised explosive devices. Those are extreme cases, but being ridiculed, defamed, and demeaned on [social media](#) is remarkably common for journalists, public intellectuals, activists, comedians, and other women in the public eye.

They get understandably tired of having their DMs and inboxes flooded with threats, pornographic gifs, and hate. So, yes, some stop speaking out. But many also self-censor in sometimes subtle ways, worrying about where they're going to post something, what they're going to write about, how they're going to write about it.

What are some of the dangers of allowing this behavior to continue?

The abuse can be personally devastating. Many women experience serious mental health effects. There are also significant social, economic, and professional ramifications. But what seems to get missed is that online abuse and harassment impact all of us, not just the people who are targeted.

The abuse says is that if you're female, especially if you are also queer or from a religious, ethnic, or

racial minority group, political involvement is both high risk and something to avoid—and that's very unhealthy for our democracy.

We lose their contributions to public discourse. And because the reluctance to weigh in is especially pronounced when the issues women wish to address are volatile, or their views are in the minority, or the conversation is male-dominated, we are losing the very perspectives that stand to most broaden our conversations.

This has epistemological and policy implications. We are also already seeing cases where this climate has deterred women from running for public office and kept women from pressing their research beyond the ivory tower.

Online abuse and harassment also contribute to the disinformation crisis. The abuse lobbed at women running or and holding public office is riddled with conspiracy theories and wild claims. Though ridiculous, these accusations have consequences. The disinformation distracts constituents, colleagues, and journalists from focusing on more pressing issues, and it requires those attacked to defend themselves, taking time away from their work. It also undermines the democratic process, since elections are only meaningful if the citizenry has adequate information when they enter the voting booth.

Is there a profile of the type of woman who is subject to this invective?

Well, like all inequalities, digital harassment is shaped by other social hierarchies. It tends to be worse for women who are members of marginalized groups—women who are queer, Muslim, and/or Latinx, for example. The abuse is intersectional, so Black women, for example, receive gendered abuse that draws on racial stereotypes in addition to having to deal with abuse that is about race and gender exclusively.

Another group that bears the brunt of this are women who write about or work in spaces that have been traditionally male—sports, tech, gaming, politics. These types of spaces tend to be incredibly hostile. The third category of people for whom this

can be especially rough are women who are perceived as feminist or, in some other way, non-compliant to gender norms. And there are plenty of women who fall into all three of these categories.

Is most of the abuse on social media, or is it elsewhere?

It comes in lots of places. A lot happens publicly on the major social media platforms, especially Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, but some abuse comes in via email and direct message. Some happens in chat rooms and in gaming spaces. There's a lot that transpires in the comment sections of newspapers and web publications, too.

What other kinds of online abuse do these women face?

Another thing that's happening is image-based abuse—sometimes women are sent pornographic content, sometimes photos and videos are altered in ways that are upsetting. For example, using photoshop or another editing tool to put the target's likeness into a pornographic image. Sometimes they are awkwardly altered and other times they look convincing. It can be incredibly upsetting.

The abuse also includes doxing, for example. One of the women I interviewed for the book had the floor plans to her house, her home address, and photos of her car published. That's really intimidating obviously, given that you don't know where it's coming from.

You talk about reward systems for corrosive behavior on social platforms. Can you explain that?

If you're very inflammatory and in a social context where other people are part of your community politically or ideologically, you're going to be retweeted, liked, followed, or favorited—you may gain followers for being objectionable. There is an incentive to photoshopping Kamala Harris' face into a demeaning pornographic image.

Much as Jeff Berry and I described in "The Outrage Industry"—on television if you're more reasoned, you don't break through the clutter of cable channels.

Being inflammatory is going to offend a lot of people, but there's going to be a slice of people who come for that, because it's dramatic and engaging and validating.

How new is all this? Online platforms didn't exist until 15 years ago.

There has always been hate mail, and hecklers are as old as the day is long. But with heckling, you have to be willing to be publicly seen as abusive or hostile. Letter writing is a lot more work than firing off a tweet.

The ability to lash out is incredibly easy now, and attackers are operating in what is effectively a consequence-free environment. If someone flags your comment on Twitter or Facebook, yes, the comment can get taken down. If there's a pattern, your account can be shut down temporarily or permanently—but it's not difficult to create a new one. It's very easy to be really horrible without consequence.

What can be done about it?

Quite a lot. Most of it would involve the platforms enforcing their existing policies. If you read the Twitter rules, you would be shocked to see the things that are not allowed on Twitter—hateful conduct, for example. Hate speech and identity-based attacks are not allowed, and yet they are everywhere.

Platforms could moderate content before it goes up, but I don't know that that's practical or even necessarily desirable. But it does seem reasonable to me that if you're new on a platform, you have a certain number of months in which you are moderated until it's determined that you're using the platform in a reasonable way. That would at least prevent people from putting up new accounts immediately and resuming their negative behavior.

It also seems reasonable that if a particular person has been targeted by a deluge of abusive content, that there might be a pause, a window of time, during which posts or tweets mentioning that person go into a moderation before they're released.

Is it possible to bring charges against abusers for harassment?

Our laws are just not set up for this—they are based on the idea that you have a crime and a perpetrator. They're not oriented around victims or targets. With abuse like this, there are harassment laws or stalking laws, but those pertain to a pattern of behavior over time. As one of my respondents in the book said, "It's not illegal to be an asshole."

If 500 people individually call you a bitch or a whore, each one of those individual missives is fully legal. The problem is that the cumulative impact is the same as, if not more dramatic than, the experience we think of as harassment, in which one person targets you repeatedly with hostile treatment.

Unless there is a "credible threat" of violence —the threat is perceived as serious and danger imminent—and the attacker can be identified, there is little legal recourse. Even defamation suits have limited utility, because if the plaintiff is considered a public figure, as is the case for most of my participants, the burden of proof is heavier.

We need to put victim-centered structures in place, such that when an onslaught of digital attacks happens, there are people who can support victims.

We need to have advocates available to answer very common questions like, "How do I get this taken down? What do I do? What are my legal options? What are the next steps?" People need support to get through this, even if what has happened is not in violation of our criminal laws.

What about the question of free speech?

There's a knee-jerk reaction about free speech that is really misguided in terms of understanding what free speech even means. Platform enforcement of their own existing policies is not government suppression. What's more, much of what is flung at these women would not be covered by the first amendment. And, at the end of the day, online abuse is inhibiting victims' ability to participate in public political discussions, so concerns about free speech are just as relevant for targets as they are

for attackers.

What I most hope is that this book prompts more careful thinking about this as something worthy of our attention, and that is not inevitable. I saw that Biden and Harris are planning to have an online harassment and [abuse](#) task force as part of their efforts with violence against women. That seems a promising step toward taking this more seriously.

Provided by Tufts University

APA citation: The high cost of online attacks against women (2021, January 26) retrieved 26 October 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-01-high-online-women.html>

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