

Gender differences in politicians exposure to online abuse: A study from the Swedish Parliament



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Threats and hate speech against politicians online

Psychological violence with the aim of affecting the victim mentally and emotionally is the most common form of violence against politicians

Social media is the arena where most abuse occurs

Online harassment of politicians can be seen as a form of psychological violence that to a large extent takes place in **public**, and at the same time is an intrusion into the **private** sphere

How can online abuse be gendered?

Three dimensions of gendered abuse:

- 1) How much and how often are men and women exposed?
- 2) Are men and women exposed to different types of abuse?
 - Type: threats, hateful messages, derogatory comments, etc.
 - Content: e.g. sexualized or linked to femininity/motherhood
- 3) Does the abuse have different consequences for men and women?
 - Propensity to leave one's mission
 - Restrictions/Silence

- Politicians' safety survey (PTU) 2012, 2014, 2016
- Survey with Members of the Swedish Parliament 2016 (n = 287, 82% response rate)
- 40 Interviews with Members of Parliament (men and women) 2016
- 8 interviews with Members of Parliament (women) in 2019

How often and to what extent are men and women MPs exposed to abuse online?

- Women and men MPs are increasingly exposed to abuse on social media (as the use of social media increases?)
 - ➡ 30% of respondents exposed in 2012 → 48% in 2016
- Women are more vulnerable to social media abuse than men.
 - ➡ 36% of men and 43% of women have experienced something threatening in the past year (2012, 2014, 2016)
- The more active an MP is on social media, the more exposure
 - ➡ Women significantly more vulnerable than men in the group of members who are very frequent users of social media

What type of abuse are men and women exposed to?

Direct threats:

- On average, no clear gender differences in exposure
- Women are overrepresented among those who are exposed very often

Offensive comments:

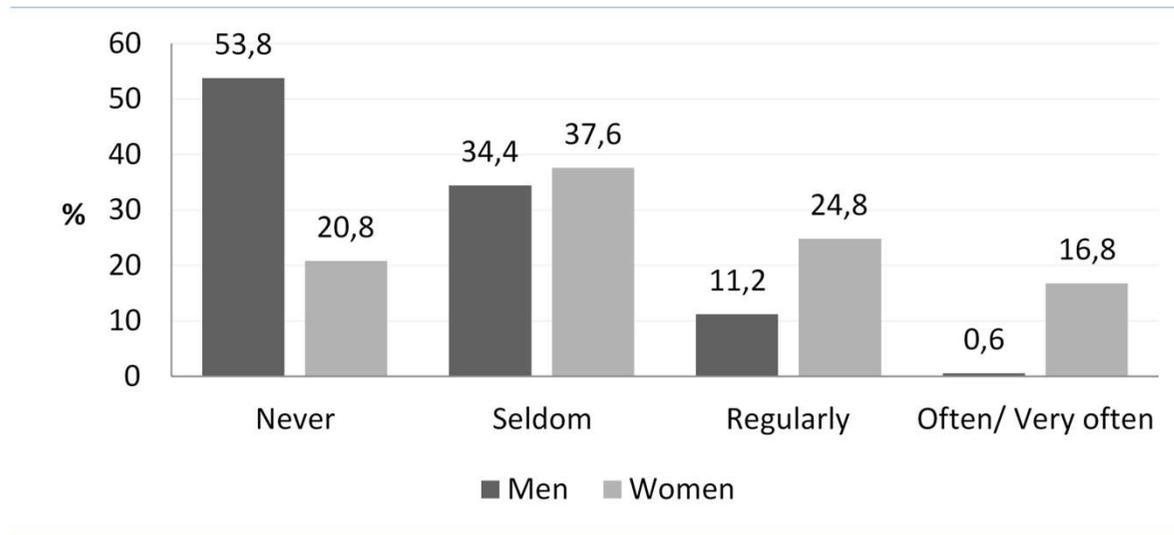
- On average, no clear gender differences in vulnerability
- Women were overrepresented among those who are exposed very often

Comments related to gender/sexuality:

- Women are exposed significantly more often than men!

Comments related to gender and/or sexuality

Figure 3: Comments linked to gender and/or sexuality



Note: How often have you experienced comments linked to gender/sexuality on social media? (Scale from 0 – never to 10 – very often). Here 0 = never; 1-3 = Seldom; 4-7 = regularly; 8-10 = often/very often.

Different types of online abuse

Both men and women are exposed to:

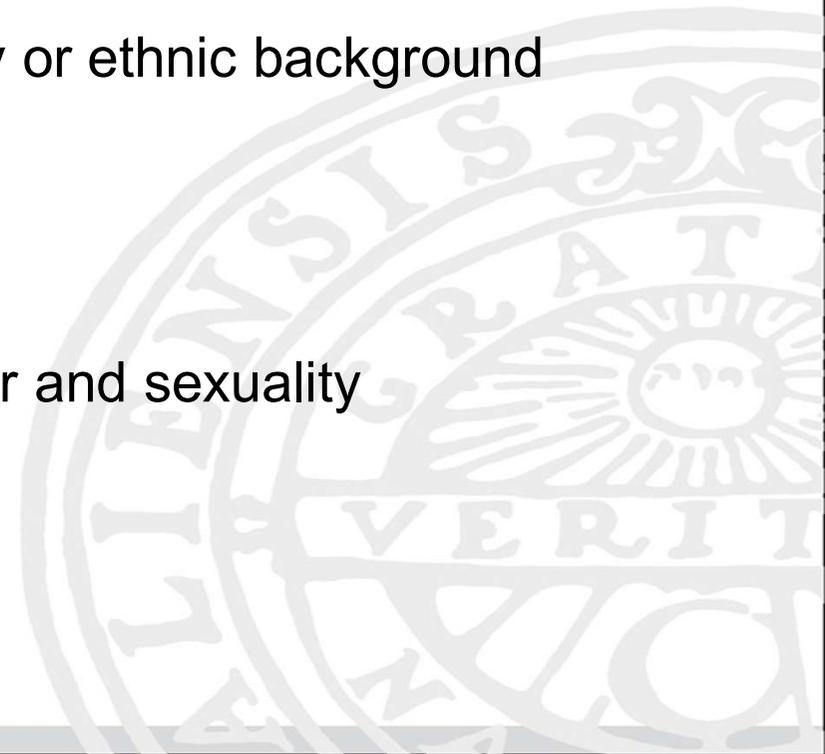
- Unsolicited and patronizing comments
 - Generally unpleasant and patronizing tone, irrelevant argumentation
- Comments linked to the member's political competence/ability
 - "You shouldn't sit in the Riksdag"
- Threats of violence (less common)
 - Threats of rape or death threats/acts of violence
 - Usually not perceived as 'real' threats

Women are more exposed to:

- Comments related to the MP's appearance
- Severe harassment related to gender, sexuality or ethnic background

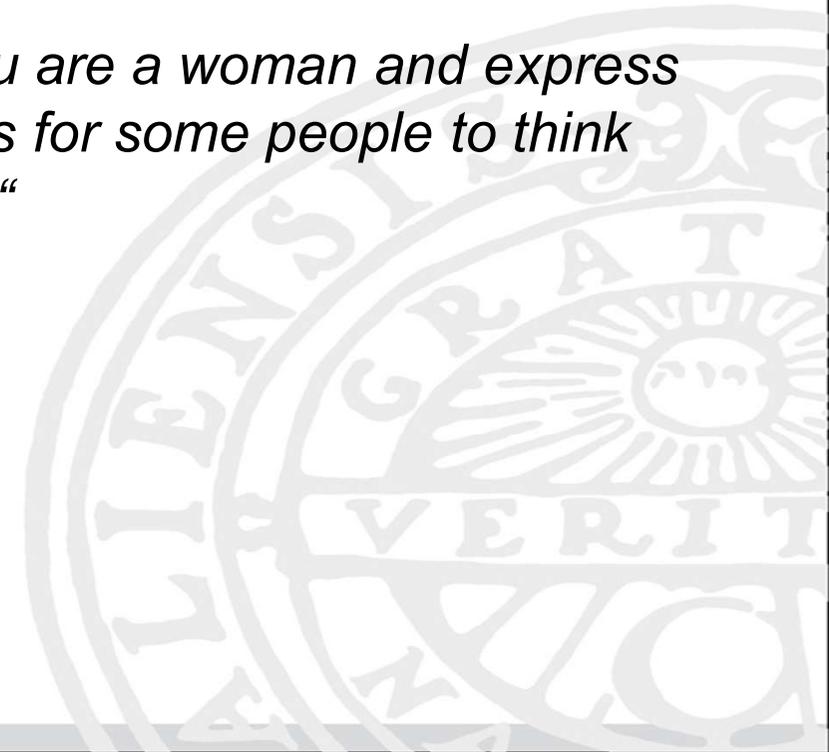
Gendered in two ways:

- Women are exposed more often than men
- Harassments that in them self alludes to gender and sexuality



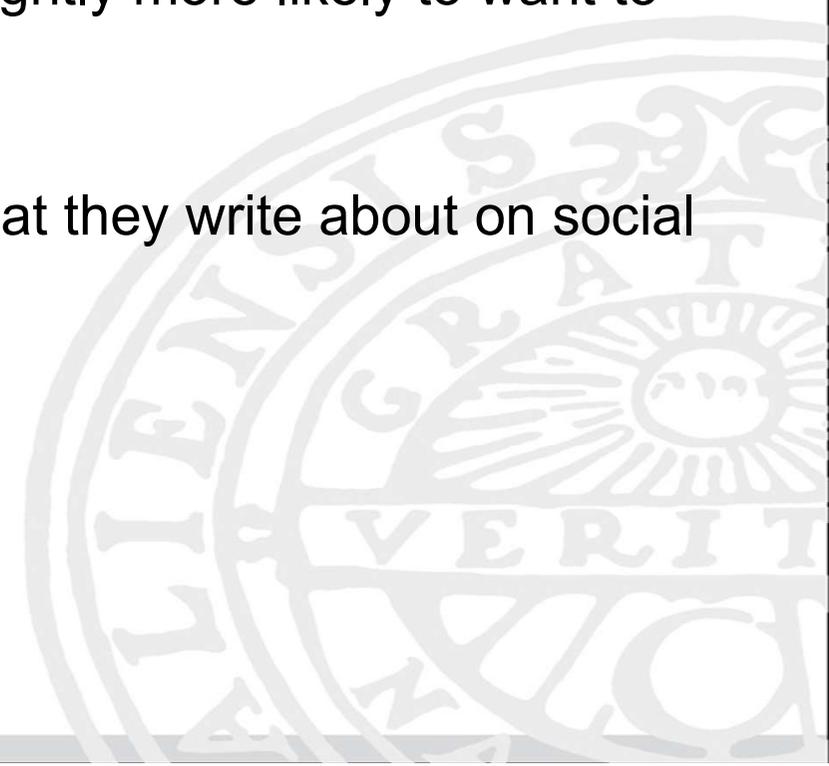
Abuse related to gender and sexuality

“many are provoked just by the fact that you are a woman and express an opinion in public. That in itself is grounds for some people to think that you should be put in place, or not exist“

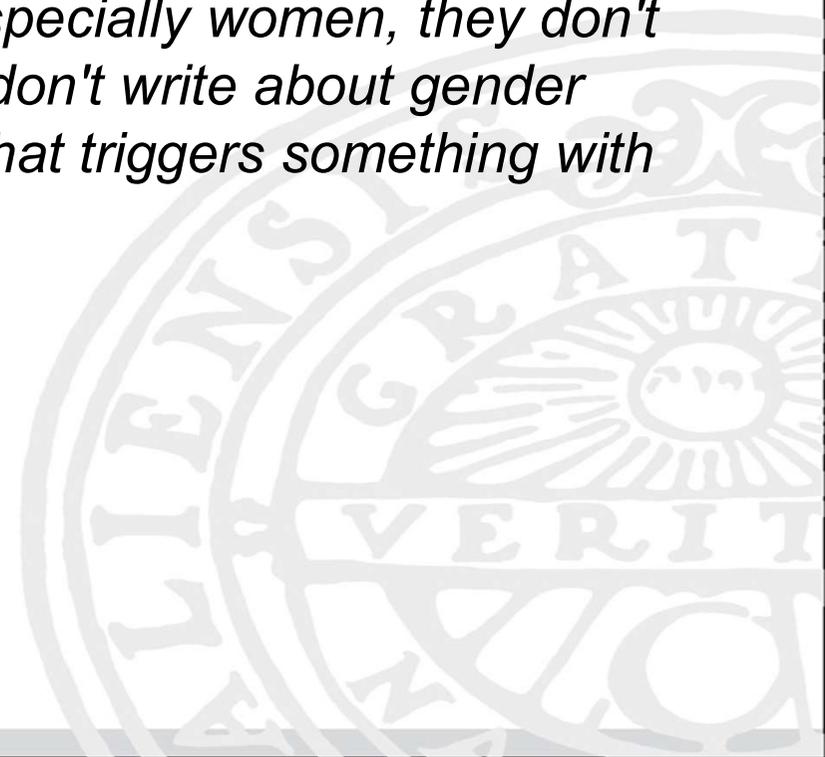


Have online abuse different consequences for men and women?

- Men who are frequently harassed online are slightly more likely to want to leave their job (for women no clear correlation)
- Women feel more silenced and restricted in what they write about on social media



"I know that many of my colleagues, especially women, they don't write about migration/integration, they don't write about gender equality, it's probably the three topics that triggers something with the trolls quite quickly"



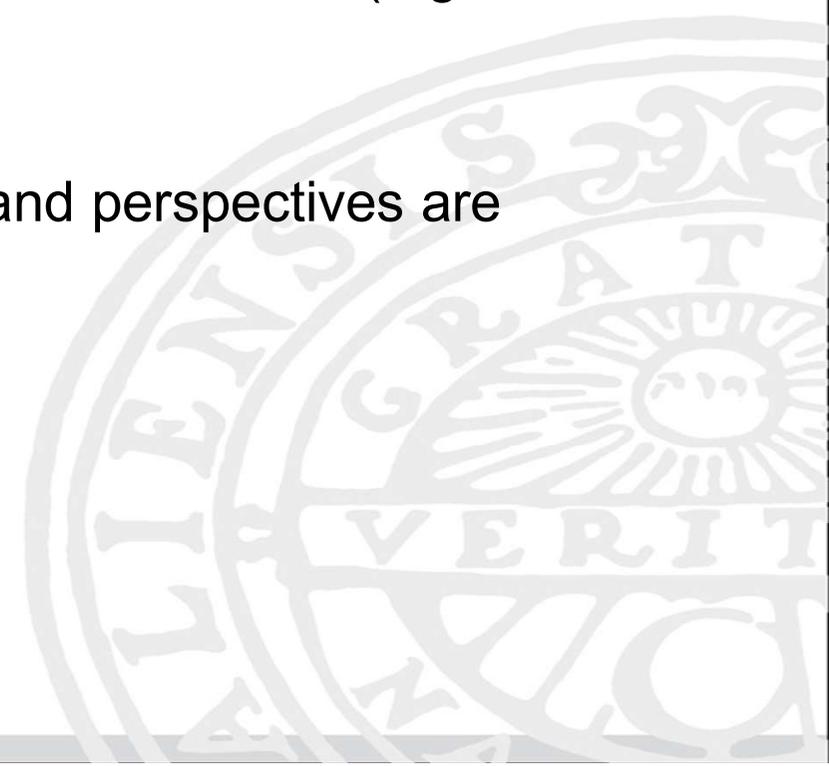
How is online abuse gendered:

- Women are more exposed to threats and hate speech, especially women who are active on social media
- Women are more often exposed to personally oriented comments linked to gender and sexuality
- Men who are frequently exposed, are more likely to want to leave their assignment. Women who are exposed often, feel more restricted and silenced

Policy implications

- How is the democratic principle of equality in representation affected if certain (groups) of politicians are more exposed than others? (e.g. women, ethnic and sexual minorities)
- How is the content of politics affected if topics and perspectives are silenced?

Solutions?



Thank you for listening!

More readings:

Erikson, J., Håkansson, S., & Josefsson, C. (2021). Three Dimensions of Gendered Online Abuse: Analyzing Swedish MPs' Experiences of Social Media. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1-17.

Håkansson, S. (2021). Do women pay a higher price for power? Gender bias in political violence in Sweden. *The journal of politics*, 83(2), 515-531.