

# Here be trolls: New Zealand's female politicians battle rising tide of misogyny

[Eva Corlett](#)

In January 2020, a New Zealand man sent two emails to prime minister Jacinda Ardern: one threatening to “personally wipe [her] off this fucking planet” and another saying he would blow her head off. It was the violent culmination of 88 lengthy emails sent over a four month period to government officials in which he referred to them as criminals and terrorists.

Last week, the man, Michael Cruickshank, 56, was unapologetic as he was sentenced to one year in prison for threatening to kill the prime minister.

Judge Gibson denied the defence's request for home detention, on the basis that public officials were very much at risk of threats to their lives and the court must act accordingly. The offence “strikes at the roots of our democracy”, he said.

The public officials who are being targeted more than most, and in increasingly more violent and alarming ways, are women in politics.

The current parliament is the most diverse in New Zealand's history, with its highest representation of women. There are now 58 female MPs, making up 48% of elected members – 12 more than in 2017, when Ardern first took office. Three out of the five parties voted in are either led, or co-led, by women.

Ardern has ticked off a few firsts for women in politics – she is the first New Zealand prime minister to [give birth while in office](#), and the second in the world, and under her leadership Nanaia Mahuta became the country's [first female minister of foreign affairs](#).

But as women forge their way across uncharted territory in politics, and become more visible, an old warning with a modern twist emerges: here be trolls.

## **Abuse increasing 'almost day on day'**

Female MPs are battling a constantly rising tide of misogynistic abuse – from rape and death threats, to derogatory comments about appearances and questioning of their qualifications – much of which is being spewed out online by people hiding behind anonymous social media accounts.



New Zealand's minister of foreign affairs Nanaia Mahuta. Photograph: Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images

There has been an exponential growth in this type of abuse, says Kate Hannah, a project lead on The Disinformation Project, which maps online misinformation, disinformation and the spread of dangerous and hateful comments. "We can definitively say ... that between the period of, say August to November last year, the level of misogynistic targeting of women in the public eye, including MPs, increased almost day on day."

The content of the abuse is rooted in traditional and conservative views of women's role in society and classic misogyny, with frequent references to motherhood, witchcraft and sexual behaviour. The tone is becoming "more vulgar and heightened," Hannah says.

**I am personally, and professionally, fearful we**

**Misogyny is not just about**

women who are challenging male dominance, Hannah says. When you have a government, with highly visible, powerful women, those feeling challenged start to get upset. "There is a lot of stuff about objectifying and controlling and keeping women 'in their place'," she says.

The abuse extends to relatively low-profile public servants too, Hannah says, who may not have the same level of security.

"I am personally, and professionally, fearful we will have our own [Jo Cox](#) moment," she says, referring to the British MP [who was shot and stabbed to death by a far-right terrorist](#) in 2016.

The police say they take threats of abuse seriously and will investigate matters where appropriate.

But Hannah says the regulatory framework for protecting people against online threats is both murky and poor, adding that there needs to be a "one-stop-shop" where someone can report abuse and action is taken either with the social media platform or via police.

"There is a real deep-rooted sense of hatred," says Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, the co-leader of Te Pati Māori (the Māori party).

Since Ngarewa-Packer entered parliament in 2020, the

threats against her have escalated, and are also nasty in their anti-Māori specificity, calling for her to experience the horrors – including rape and murder – her ancestors went through at the hands of colonisers.



Maori Party co-leaders Debbie Ngarewa-Packer says 'soul destroying' abuse escalates when Māori issues are in the news.

Photograph: Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images

"It can really be quite soul destroying, because the things I was raised to be proud of are the things that make the attackers most uncomfortable."

Recently, Ngarewa-Packer's husband [has been attacked](#) and someone has scaled her apartment building, while threats come from both anonymous and identifiable people in voicemails, emails and social media comments.

The threats become more pronounced whenever anything to do with Māori policy arises, regardless of whether it is a policy supported by her party, she says.

"I would not be surprised if young Māori women who are

very proud of their identity don't step up because that [hatred] is so deep rooted."

## **Fanned from within**

An MP from the right-wing ACT Party, Karen Chhour, who is also Māori, says the harassment levelled at her is more personal than political compared with her male colleagues. She accepts that part of having a public role is facing criticism but abuse threatens the accessibility New Zealanders have to politicians.

"That's what makes our country so special – politicians are accessible – and I would hate to see that change."

While the abuse often comes from the public, the flames can be fanned within parliament's halls and by those associated with political parties.

Last week, news website Stuff reported on a [campaign of misogynistic online bullying](#) against left-wing female politicians Megan Woods, the housing minister, Labour MP Sarah Pallett and Christchurch city councillor Sara Templeton. The abuse came from a fake social media account and was eventually linked to a member of the youth wing of the National Party – the Young Nats – who has since left the group.

Centre-right National Party MP Nicola Willis condemned the behaviour and acknowledged Templeton for notifying police.

“What that has done has reminded a lot of people – keyboard warriors, anonymous people – that in fact they are not anonymous. When they harass people they can be found out.”



Deputy National party leader Nicola Willis says abuse sends the message that if you're a woman in politics 'don't be too loud'. Photograph: Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images

Willis said she hasn't experienced the same level of abuse as some other women, but she regularly faces misogynistic comments and people "seeking to silence" her.

"I find that reprehensible because the message that sends is: if you're a woman in politics, don't be too feisty, don't be too loud ... because then someone might attack you for it."

Left-wing Green Party MP Golriz Ghahraman, the country's first refugee member of parliament, experienced an onslaught of abuse from the moment she entered politics. "It became very violent, very quickly."

In her 2017 maiden speech to parliament – 18 months before the Christchurch mosque attacks – she highlighted the prevalence of racism in New Zealand and referenced comments on her social media threads that said it was “time to load our shotguns”.

In 2019 she was assigned a security escort following a series of death threats – abuse that she believes escalated after comments from other politicians.

“When we play communities, rather than issues, when we debate immigration in a xenophobic way ... there are communities out there that you’re making unsafe,” she said of politicians who rely on these tactics.

The people copping the most abuse in parliament – women, Māori, and people of colour – are the same groups being abused within the community, or watching abuse towards politicians play out online, Ghahraman says.

“There’s this threat of making politics less accessible and less diverse if we act like it’s just a given that women who make themselves visible are going to get this kind of threat.”