

Why escalating misogynistic abuse of Jacinda Ardern is a national security issue

The escalation of violent gendered abuse and widespread online misogyny may represent never-before-seen threats to national security and our social fabric. Michelle Duff reports

In 2017, then-Labour leader [Jacinda Ardern](#) was asked if she planned to have babies. This was sexist – would a man have been asked the same thing?

Last month, a protest attended by thousands was accompanied by incitements to “hang the b...”, and a makeshift hearse. This week, the same in which [women councillors in Wellington](#) described repeated gendered abuse and a [man was arrested for threatening to kill Ardern](#), the Prime Minister’s face was [superimposed on a sex workers’ body](#) and posted on Facebook.

Within hours of being put up the post showing “Ardern” available for sexual hire in bondage gear had 2.3k reactions (like and laugh emojis) 1.8k comments, including violative and derogatory horse references, and 351 shares.

It was a joke, the company said.

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Two years into the pandemic, there is talk about the new normal.

Here's what that looks like.

It is open misogyny, visible on every platform and supported and promoted by upvotes on Reddit, laughing emojis on Facebook, comments about "that woman" on LinkedIn, and someone who looks like your Aunty referring to the PM as "Cindy" and calling her a "c..."

It is targeted and increasingly violent misogynistic abuse and threats - illustrated by but not limited to the escalation in gendered hatred directed towards Ardern - being directed at public-facing women from [central](#) and [local](#) [body politicians](#) to [journalists](#), [public servants](#), [academics](#) and chief executives.

"If you block them they'll find you, they complain to your boss, they'll call in their tribe of helpers," says Palmerston North City Councillor Lorna Johnson, who has received "terrible threats," been abused for her looks and age, told her period will get in the way of doing her job, and to "go

back to the kitchen.”

“The aim of this is to silence women in office and pressure us not to be in public life. Most of the time I shrug it off, but it was a big factor in whether I was going to stand again for election. Could I face another three years of this?”

In Motueka, Joni Tomsett, 28, is an elected member of her local community board and was thinking about a career in politics. But after just one term, she’s seriously reconsidering.

“I feel completely put off about being in the public eye. There’s already enough barriers as a young woman, I am epileptic, so I have a disability, and I’m pansexual, so there’s that to navigate too. It’s devastating when you’re trying to make an impact and see this kind of stuff.”

Hagen Hopkins/ Getty Images

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has decisions to make about how long to stay in the red traffic light setting.

Women describe experiences ranging from being berated or belittled in online forums to receiving rape or death threats towards them or their children in private messages, or via email.

They are called or texted late at night, have their home addresses and personal information published online - known as “doxxing,” which researchers at Te Pūnaha Matatini’s [The Disinformation Project](#) say happens more

often to women - or the publications of their names on an "execution list".

The amount and tone of [gendered disinformation](#) and misogynistic abuse online has exploded since last August, constituting both a national security threat and a human rights issue that authorities are struggling to combat.

It appears to be part of a concentrated effort to suppress women's participation in public and political life, borne from far-right ideology designed to oppress women that has spread to a more mainstream audience.

"There's an increase in the amount, and there's an increase in the intent, and that's to control and punish women who challenge male dominance, the Prime Minister but all women," says Disinformation Project lead Kate Hannah.

It is worse for [women of colour and wāhine Māori, gender minorities and disabled women](#), she says.

"We can see that misogyny and the targeting of women, the cyberstalking and abuse of women in the public eye and not in the public eye, is a critical issue in New Zealand and one our institutions are struggling to deal with appropriately."

Misogyny is considered a gateway into violent extremism [by researchers](#). Men such as Anders Breivik and the Christchurch terrorist were steeped in anti-woman ideology, while last March Canada's Alek Minassian –

radicalised on online forums and motivated by a hatred of women typical of the "incel" subculture – was convicted of ten counts of murder for his attack in Toronto.

On Telegram, which hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders browse, pushback against the increasingly toxic and violent group think of echo chambers is almost non-existent. This outright violent hatred of women which was once only found on gaming forums like [4Chan](#) and other dark corners of the Internet then bleeds back to Facebook, Twitter and impacts mainstream political discourse.

Yet misogyny and the targeting of women has not been a central feature of [internal Government documents](#) and [public external reports](#) on mis- and disinformation.

[Reports released](#) by the cross-Government security agency Combined Threat Assessment Group in March talk about "single-issue motivated violent extremism" and "identity-motivated violent extremism" which included incels, but from these it is unclear how seriously threats against women are being taken.

The current threat level is medium, with a terrorist attack thought to be feasible.

Several people spoken to by *Stuff* cited [British MP Jo Cox](#), who was murdered by a far-right terrorist in 2016, as an example of where this violent online rhetoric towards women leads.

“The fact that this is even being considered in New Zealand is indicative of where we are at. Pre-pandemic, it wouldn’t even have been considered as a threat,” says Sanjana Hattotuwa, a research fellow at The Disinformation Project who tracks online forums daily.

He is concerned at how seriously agencies are taking it, including police.

ROBERT KITCHIN/Stuff

Director-General of Security for NZSIS Rebecca Kitteridge faces questions at the select committee.

The New Zealand Security Intelligence Service Director-General Rebecca Kitteridge said she considered misogyny specifically as a motivation for violence and as a component of numerous extremist ideologies. It had been tracking the “significant increase” in anti-authority violent rhetoric seen since [Covid-19 health measures and restrictions](#).

It also took misogyny into account in its terrorism threat levels. “Any threat of violent extremism, including extreme violent ideology associated with misogynistic beliefs, is reflected in the terrorism threat level.”

This week, [Richard Sivell](#) appeared in Tauranga District Court on charges including threatening to kill Ardern. But it is not known how closely police are monitoring this type of violent abuse, or if there is any centralised overall response.

Police did not respond to request for comment.

Internal Affairs said it was aware of harm but that misogyny and misogynoir – the mix of misogyny and racism faced by women of colour – “seldom reach the threshold of illegality under our legislation,” and was the domain of Netsafe and police.

Ardern's office declined a request for comment.

'Silencing and suppressing' women

Gendered disinformation is defined by the EU Disinfo Lab as false or misleading information attacking women (especially political leaders, journalists and public figures), [basing the attack on their identity as women](#). “The techniques...are diverse and include misogynist comments that reinforce gender stereotypes, sexualisation and the diffusion of graphic contents, online harassment and cyber-attacks,” it writes.

This is an inherent threat to women's human rights, which the [UN Human Rights Council](#) considers a “litmus test” for a society's human rights standards.

It is difficult to look at or read some of the distressing imagery and words used frequently on the main disinformation channels frequented by those who like to argue they are “typical New Zealanders,” or simply anti-mandate.

Warwick Smith/Stuff

Palmerston North City Councillor Lorna Johnson spoke to Stuff about the abuse she has faced.

Doctored pictures of Ardern and other women as demons or witches are prevalent. There is talk of women being "succubus," a particular kind of woman in folklore that sucks men's strength. High-profile women of colour are compared to animals and Pākehā women are "race traitors." There are rape jokes and transphobic and homophobic memes.

"When people talk about 'witchcraft,' imagery of the Prime Minister or other women as witches, these are classic misogynistic tropes. They're old and ancient and have a resonance with people even if they don't know why," Hannah says.

"To call someone a witch has an acknowledgement they should be punished or dunked. To see this vilification, this uprising of this biblical language of women as witches, it's shocking."

It's a sliding scale that starts with the word "Cindy."

Some might find this funny, but its aim is to diminish. Massey University senior lecturer Dr Suze Wilson, who studies leadership, says no-one called John Key "Johnny," or Chris Luxon "Chrissy," in an attempt to infantilise or belittle them.

“Right from the outset you had people saying “I don’t want to be told what to do by that woman,” with an element of “how dare she tell me what to do.’ That had to pre-exist for this to be possible.”

But that was petty compared to now. “What’s really tipped it is the more violent rhetoric. The straight out abusive terms, the c-word, the horse-face, the threats to kill.

“It comes from this idea that if any woman comes into a position of power she’s not acting as a ‘good’ woman should – and that’s why this doesn’t only come from men, it comes from people who cleave to more traditional idea around gender roles. The idea that women should be mothers and caregivers, that’s their natural destiny.”

Anti-feminism and misogyny in the far-right

Disinformation researcher Byron Clark said misogyny is a core tenet of far right ideology. “They imagine an idealised past, and they see feminism as part of the moral decay of western societies. That can lead to some of those misogynistic attitudes among men, and the internalised misogyny among the women.

“Young men feel marginalised, and they might be economically marginalised, and they blame that on other groups trying to gain equality. A lot of the far right see themselves as victims, and anti-feminism is a big part of that.”

ANDY MACDONALD / STUFF

Community board member Joni Tomsett told Stuff she had been subjected to abuse.

Ideas cross-pollinate between the conspiracy theory and far right scenes, he says. "They're meeting and talking with people in those spaces, conspiracy theories get normalised and misogyny gets normalised."

The [case of Christchurch MP Sara Templeton](#), who went to court to reveal two Young Nats were behind a toxic and sustained campaign of abuse against her, shows this is a much wider problem than the minority of people who openly support or identify with the far right.

"It's hard to know if that young man was influenced by the far right particularly, or there was so much of this misogynistic harassment going on social media that they thought it was normal."

Professor Paul Spoonley, a sociologist who studies the far right, said he had been surprised to see how readily middle New Zealand and people who just disagreed with Government policies had been so quick to attack Ardern on the basis of her gender.

"Something that strikes me is how misogynistic some of the politics - anti-vax and anti-mandate - politics have become, and that seepage into other areas of life. Groups that want to protest about the government choose to be very hostile to the PM and other female politicians, for

example some of the signs we saw at Groundswell," he says.

"There's this willingness to revert to some pretty traditional sexist views, and a willingness to both demonise, demean and diminish women who do take on senior public roles.

"The question is now for the next election, how much of this has seeped out into a broader constituency, and will there be more support for these minority anti-government parties? And will National and ACT appeal to these anti-Prime Minister politics?

"The last three or four decades we seem to have made progress on the role of women in both private and public life, as we have with Māori, and these moments remind us that perhaps we haven't made as much progress as we thought.

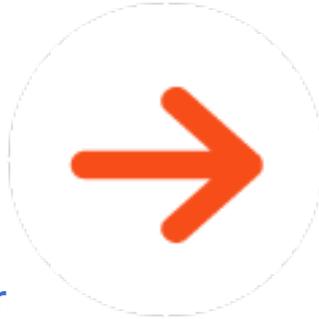
"The anti-government protests have provided a terminology and a reason for being anti-the prime minister or anti-females in senior roles. For them, sexism has been given a reason to exist again."

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