

'Disgusting' abuse targeted at women in Wellington local government

Anita Baker had never been called a c... before being elected mayor of Porirua nearly three years ago.

These days, it's hurled at her all the time on social media. She receives so much personal abuse about her appearance that she doesn't wear leopard print or heels in public.

"Men do not get treated the same way," she said.

"It's really, really hard to deal with, and sometimes it feels like every comment is negative."



KEVIN STENT/Stuff

Porirua mayor Anita Baker has received three online death threats this year. (File photo)

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On Thursday, Christchurch Young Nat Jessee MacKenzie admitted having an anonymous account where he bullied female politicians [with constant and toxic abuse](#).

Sara Templeton, the city councillor who spoke out about the abuse, said she [wanted to draw attention](#) to the culture of harassment and misogyny in politics.

Baker has received three death threats this year.

"If I didn't have Phil, my partner, I'd be scared."

Supplied

Examples of the online abuse received by the women on Wellington City Council and Porirua mayor Anita Baker.

The online abuse, which was "appalling and disgusting", [took a toll](#) on her mental health. It was difficult to ignore.

"Once, when I was really down with all the online negativity, someone at the supermarket came up to me and said I was doing a good job. I was so surprised ... the abuse makes you doubt yourself".

Abuse was widespread among the women on Wellington City Council too.

Wellington City councillor Jill Day, who descends from Ngāti Tūwharetoa, said she experienced a “double whammy” of abuse as a woman who is Māori.

“It’s hard to rise above it, but we must hear the voices of Māori and women in public life.”

When she advocated for more te reo on the council last year, her post was shared on the Facebook page of the National Front – a white supremacist group.

The comments were “very derogatory”, Day said, including comments that she did not look “Māori enough”.

Supplied

Racist abuse towards Wellington City Councillors Jill Day and Tamatha Paul during controversy over the Shelly Bay development.

Council staff had to help her hide the comments after members of the public became upset.

“There’s a bit of relief in stepping away from the abuse by not standing for council again this year,” Day said. She and colleague Tamatha Paul were the [targets of abuse](#) for their votes on the Shelly Bay development.

Teri O’Neill, another Wellington City councillor, is a young woman who is openly queer. She received “loads” of death

threats about the [iwi/council dispute at Shelly Bay](#).

Examples of the online abuse directed towards the women on the Wellington City Council.

Supplied

Examples of the online abuse directed towards the women on the Wellington City Council.

O'Neill said the abuse was so scary she would not encourage other young people or queer people to stand for council, because in the election process they have to make their address public.

During a period of targeted hate over Shelly Bay, O'Neill had to have security guards accompany her to a meet and greet at a local library.

"I think the abuse happens because the system is cut out for old, white men, and giving up that space is uncomfortable. People express that with sexism, transphobia, and racism.

Social media abuse received by Teri O'Neill.

Supplied

Social media abuse received by Teri O'Neill.

"I try to have empathy to where they're coming from as much as possible, but the comments are heart-breaking."

Councillor Rebecca Matthews said the personal comments she received were nothing like the job-based criticism male politicians dealt with.

"For me, the criticism quickly goes to being fat and

comments about my hair, comments about my physical appearance."

Monique Ford/Stuff

Teri O'Neill had to have security at a meet and greet during a period of sustained online abuse. (File photo)

She received [a death threat](#) in 2020, which she reported to police, but said that was almost easier to deal with because it was clear-cut that she could report it.

The everyday abuse was "upsetting and hurts my feelings", Matthews said.

"We are just people trying to do our jobs."

Councillor Laurie Foon received an email saying "where do you get [your] brain from?" and "we need more (sensible and unbiased) male Crs", after she said safer cycleways would support mothers riding cargo bikes.

Ross Giblin/Stuff

Rebecca Matthews says the online abuse she receives is very different from the criticisms directed at her male colleagues. (File photo)

Fleur Fitzsimons had also been subject to "cowardly" anonymous abuse and in person, in front of her children. "The abuse gets me down, but I have strong friendships and support, which means I gain perspective back quickly."

Nicola Young said she was "wary" of social media because

of abuse. "If you're going into politics you need a thick skin, but Twitter is a cesspit."

Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, a researcher at [The Disinformation Project](#), said they had seen a "distressing and distinct" growth of online misogyny in Aotearoa through anti-vax communities. These attitudes were a gateway to violent extremism, he said.

Sanjana Hattotuwa/Supplied

Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, a disinformation researcher, says misogyny is a problem for social cohesion in New Zealand. (File photo)

The growth of these attitudes was a "massive challenge to overcome", Hattotuwa said. "We're really worried. This is a problem for social cohesion."

Based on his research, pākehā men in online anti-vax communities were mostly misogynists, and frequently commented about the rape and murder of women, especially Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern.

"Misogyny is not becoming normalised, it is normalised. It's very much present and expanding in Aotearoa," he said.

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