WOMEN FOR ELECTION

A Threat to Gender Equity and Democratic Representation

The impact of online abuse to women's safety, leadership and political participation

October 2026 v2

Foreword

When the public feels they can understand, engage with, and trust our political institutions, our democracy thrives. This includes women feeling that they can run for office without fear of abuse or attacks.

In Australia, many women in public life are facing growing levels of online abuse and intimidation. Overseas, this pressure is causing women to step back from public debate, limit their online visibility and question whether they should continue in politics. When women withdraw, democracies suffer.

This report, "*A Threat to Gender Equity and Democratic Representation*", shows how widespread the problem in Australia has become. It also shows the impact on women's safety, wellbeing and willingness to stay in public life. Online abuse is not only a personal issue. It affects representation, public debate and the strength of our democratic institutions.

Women for Election is committed to helping women enter, stay and thrive in public office. Our aim is for this report to start a conversation and set out the evidence and actions needed to protect elected women and female candidates to safeguard democratic participation.

"Forewarned is forearmed".
Licia Heath, CEO, Women for Election

What led to this report?

Through access to international research and academic experts, including interviews with female MPs in Europe, Asia, the Americas, and the UK, Women for Election witnessed the rising trend in online abuse directed at women in public life. Overseas, online abuse has been increasing and becoming more coordinated, having a direct impact on women's participation in politics. Critically, online abuse has escalated to offline attacks.

In early 2026, we could see the same warning signs appearing in Australia. Women in our community were reporting back about the growing levels of harassment, intimidation and personal attacks they were experiencing online, linked to their political involvement. Our mission at Women for Election is to inspire and equip more women, of all backgrounds, to run for public office, so that all levels of government are representative of the communities they govern. These growing online attacks strike at the heart of our mission, and we knew we needed to better understand the broader experience of Australian women running for, and elected to, public office.

In July 2026, Women for Election conducted a national survey to understand the scale of abuse against elected women and candidates in Australia and to look at practical ways to improve safety through awareness, technology solutions and legislative change.

In August 2026, we collected dozens of case studies from elected women and female candidates across political parties, across the country and across all three levels of government. The survey results and case studies combine to provide an initial picture of the scale and impact of online abuse for women in Australian politics, but there is more research to be done.

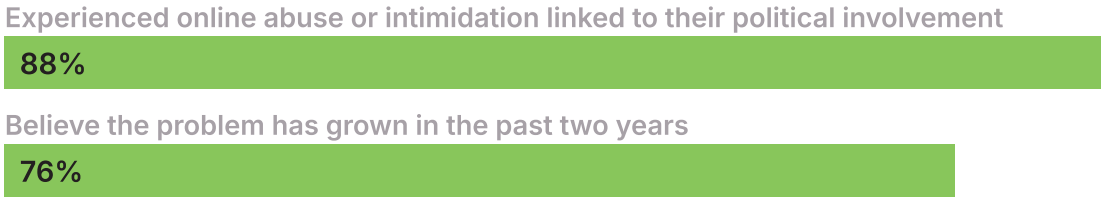
> **"When capable women are choosing not to run, not to speak, or to leave public office because of relentless online abuse, Australian democracy is at risk."**

Findings

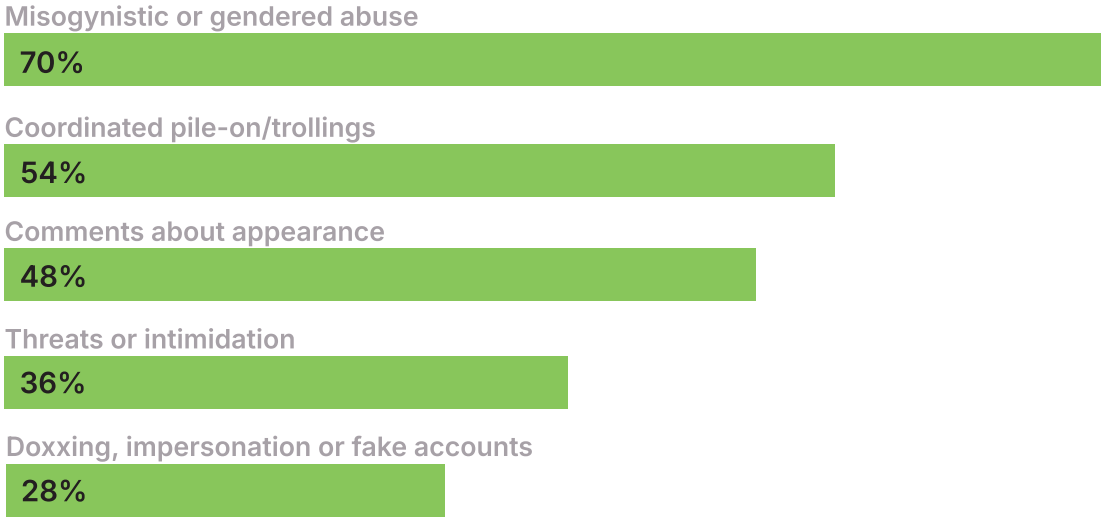
The scale of online abuse facing women in public life

Online abuse is widespread and believed to be increasing.

88 per cent of women have experienced online abuse or intimidation linked to their political involvement, and **76 per cent** believe the problem has grown in the past two years. For many women, abuse is frequent and expected.



Women reported a wide range of online abuse, often happening at the same time. The most common form was misogynistic or gendered abuse (**70 per cent**). Many women also faced threats or intimidation (**36 per cent**), doxxing or impersonation (**28 per cent**) and coordinated pile-on/trolling (**54 per cent**). These patterns match international trends and show that abuse is becoming more targeted and more coordinated.

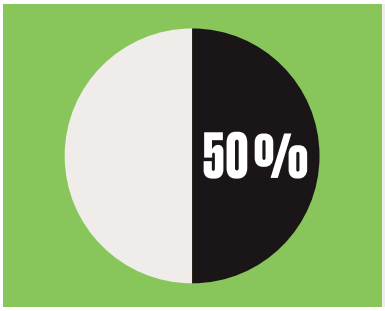


Findings

How online abuse is reshaping women's political participation

Online abuse is changing decisions about running, staying and speaking out.

82 per cent have changed their behaviour because of online abuse.

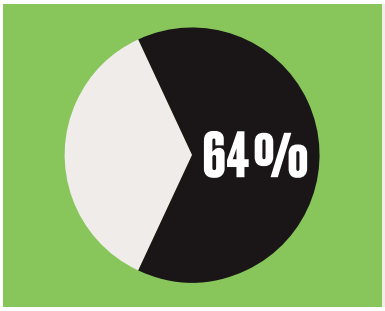


Unsure, or would not have run, had they known the extent of the abuse

Women who regret running are warning others off

Of the women who said they would not have run had they known the extent of the abuse, **78 per cent** have warned other women against running.

And of women who said they would still have run, **22 per cent** have warned other women against running.



Abuse has made them less likely to run again, seek higher office, encourage others

Findings

Women in local government and regional women are the hardest hit

Women in local government bear the heaviest impact of online abuse. False rumours and misinformation are their defining form of abuse, reported by three in four councillors. They report the highest levels of stress and anxiety, and are the most likely to have become less willing to speak publicly.

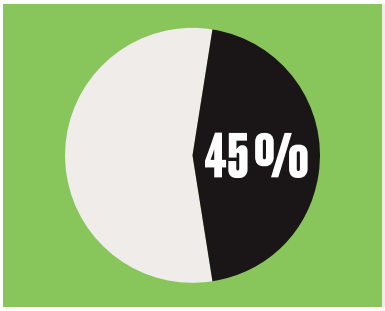
Regional women are the hardest hit. **100 per cent** of regional survey respondents experienced online abuse.

Regional women are about three times as likely to say abuse has made them less likely to encourage other women to run.

When abuse spills over into personal and family life

Online abuse does not stop with the individual. **45 per cent** have had family members or campaign supporters targeted because of their political involvement. Women described stress, fear and increased security measures at home and in their community.

When family or campaign supporters are targeted women are around **3x** as likely to say they wouldn't have run at all had they known.

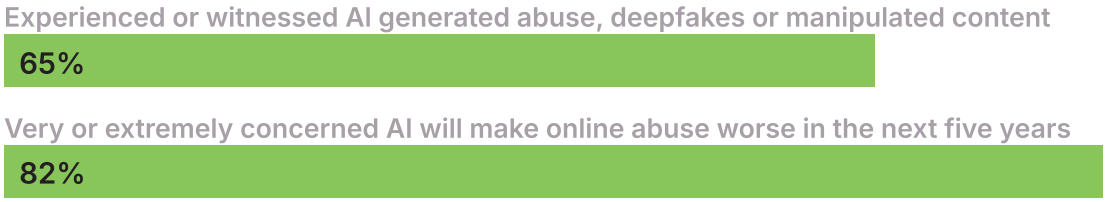


Family members or campaign supporters targeted because of their political involvement

Findings

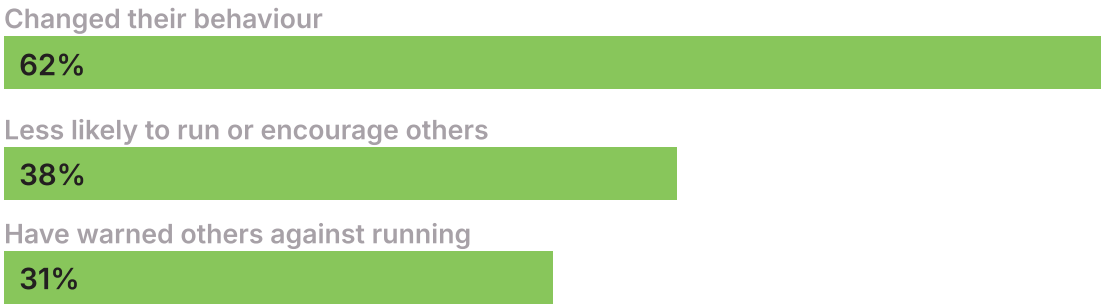
The new frontier: AI driven abuse and manipulated content

AI is accelerating the scale and speed of online harm. **82 per cent** are very or extremely concerned AI will make online abuse worse in the next five years. **98 per cent** are concerned AI will make online abuse worse in the next five years.



Even women who have not experienced abuse, pull back and warn others

Of the 13 survey respondents who had not personally experienced online abuse, simply watching or hearing of the abuse directed at others had an effect on their behaviour.



Findings

The emotional and wellbeing impact on women in public life

Online abuse has a clear effect on women's wellbeing.

- **61 per cent** reported increased stress or anxiety.
- **52 per cent** reported safety and security concerns.
- **34 per cent** took time away from campaigning/public life.
- **35 per cent** are less willing to speak publicly.

Women described feeling worn down, isolated and constantly alert to new attacks.

For women experiencing a range of online abuse, the harm accumulates

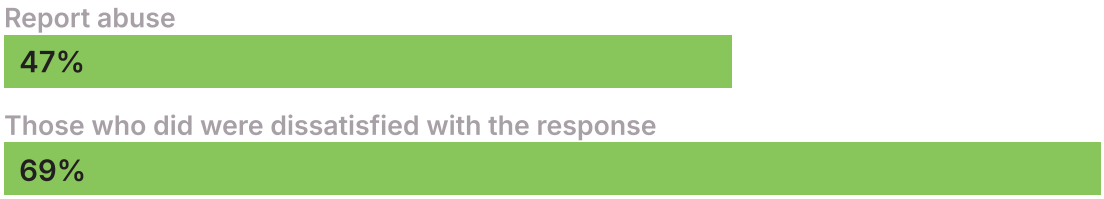
The greater the variety of abuse women receive, the greater the cumulative harm on their wellbeing. This relationship is strong and highly statistically significant.

> "AI makes it much cheaper, faster and easier to produce and distribute abusive, disinformation-laced content."

Findings

Reporting paths that do not work

Reporting systems are slow, unclear and often ineffective. Only **47 per cent** reported the abuse, and **69 per cent** of those who did were dissatisfied with the response. Women described inconsistent processes, limited follow up and a lack of clear support.



Women want accountability, not coping tools

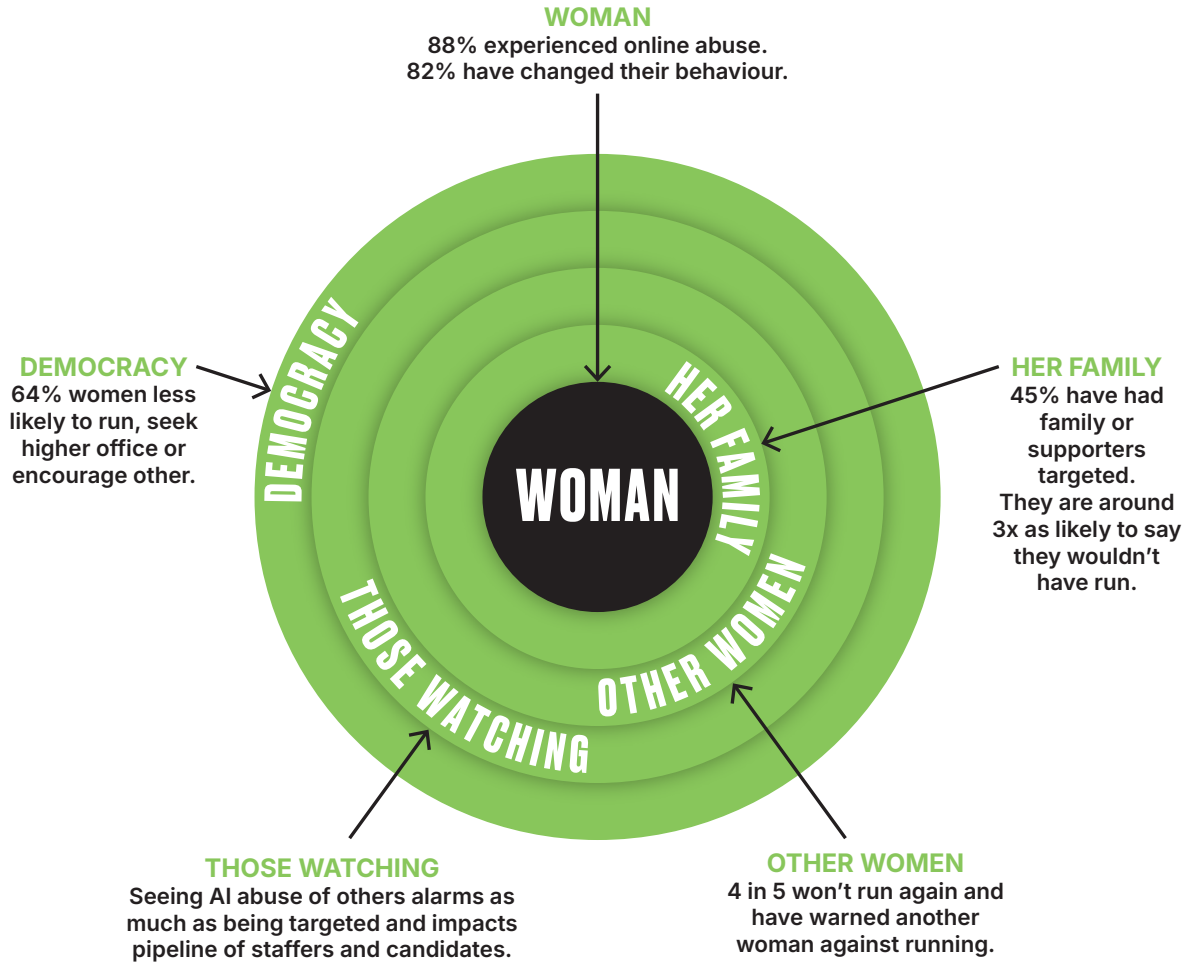
Survey respondents want to see stronger action by tech platforms, greater penalties for abusers and legal reforms. They do not believe the burden should be on women to deal with online abuse.

> **"When women are silenced, democracy suffers, and this impacts all of us."**

The Online Abuse and Women's Political Participation survey was conducted by Women for Election in July 2026. 110 elected women, candidates, former representatives and women considering running responded. Respondents included representation across local, state, territory and federal government.

The Ripple Effect for our Democracy

Online abuse does not stop with the woman being targeted. Its effects spread outward, influencing families, supporters, peers, and even future female candidates who have never experienced abuse themselves. This ripple effect shapes behaviour, discourages political participation, and creates barriers far beyond a single incident, ultimately weakening Australia's representative democracy.



The cost to democratic participation

Online abuse is reshaping the conditions of democratic participation. It determines who feels able to run for office, who can safely remain in public roles, and which issues women judge too risky to raise.

When women are pushed out of public office, the breadth of public debate contracts and key perspectives disappear from decision-making.

The cumulative effect is a loss of the diversity of thought and talent required for robust, legitimate governance and a measurable weakening of Australia's democratic system.

National Action Plan

Women for Election is calling for a National Action Plan to protect women in public office and strengthen democratic participation. The plan focuses on clear and practical steps that respond directly to the evidence in this report.

> **"Online violence doesn't stay online – it involves a dangerous trajectory to physical violence that demands vigilance."**

Research & Resources

Report	Author / Institution	Year	Key Findings
Tackling the Slow Violence that Undermines Democracy	Laidlaw, Lennox & Singh	2026	• Harassment of Canadian MPs increased 800% over five years. • Threat investigations rose from 8 cases to 530 cases. • 74% of Quebec municipal officials reported online harassment. • 741 officials left office after the 2021 cycle. • Abuse accumulates over time as "slow violence", eroding wellbeing and democratic participation.
Better Politics Foundation / Safety in the Office / Law Repository Review	International legal sources	2026	• Countries introducing laws and codes of conduct to address violence against politicians. • Women recognised as facing disproportionate and gendered political violence. • Responses extend beyond criminal law to include workplace standards, reporting mechanisms and electoral protections. • Political violence increasingly recognised as a democratic issue.
ALIGN Global Political Violence Review	ALIGN	2026	• 71% of parliamentarians experienced violence online or offline. • 29% of women in European municipalities experienced cyberviolence. • 60% of women parliamentarians in Southeast Asia experienced online attacks. • 96% of New Zealand MPs experienced online harassment. • 41% of politicians reported low mental wellbeing.
Not On My Council: Experiences of Women in Local Government	Diane Coleman, Western Sydney University & ALGWA	2026	• 60% experienced online abuse, threats or harassment. • 61% experienced bullying, harassment or intimidation including in council chambers, at council events, during election campaigns, over the phone, as well as in online environments. • 59% reported health impacts. • 26% would not run again. • Only 43% would recommend the role to other women.

Research & Resources (continued)

Report	Author / Institution	Year	Key Findings
Online Violence Impacts, Manifestations and Redress in the AI Age	UN Women	2025	• 70% of women human rights defenders, activists, journalists and media workers experienced online violence. • 41% experienced offline harm linked to online abuse. • 24% experienced AI-assisted abuse such as deepfakes and manipulated content. • Clear escalation from online attacks to real-world intimidation. • Online violence shown to silence women and weaken democratic participation.
Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliaments (Asia-Pacific)	IPU, CPA & AIPA	2025	• 76% of women parliamentarians experienced psychological violence. • 60% experienced online gender-based attacks. • 61% experienced sexist behaviour. • 34% received threats of death, rape or abduction. • Younger women and women in opposition face extreme harm (up to 100% psychological violence).
Tipping Point: The Chilling Escalation of Online Violence Against Women in the Public Sphere	UN Women	2025	• 70% of women in public-facing roles experienced online violence. • 41% said online abuse escalated into offline harassment, intimidation or attacks. • Nearly 1 in 4 reported abuse involving AI, including tools such as deepfakes. • Reports of offline attacks connected to online violence more than doubling in recent years. • Online violence is increasingly being used to silence women and discourage their participation in public life.
Jo Cox Civility Commission	Jo Cox Foundation, UK	2024	• 70% of local councillors experienced abuse or intimidation. • 80% of Welsh MPs felt threatened since taking office. • Almost 90% of female MSPs feared for their safety. • 73% of female MPs avoid speaking about some issues online. • Abuse deters women and young people from entering politics and influences elected representatives to leave public life.

About Women For Election

Women for Election is a politically neutral, not-for-profit organisation that supports women to enter, stay and thrive in public office. We work across all levels of government and with women of all backgrounds. Our mission is to strengthen Australia's democracy by increasing the number, diversity and safety of women in public office.

We provide practical training, skills development and support to help women build confidence, understand political systems and run effective campaigns. We also work with communities, political parties and government to improve the conditions that shape women's participation in politics.

Our impact across all our programs

552 Of our participants **have run** – across all levels of government

201 Of our participants **have been elected** – across all levels of government

NOTE: These figures cover all of Women for Election's programs, inclusive of all funding sources.

WOMEN FOR ELECTION

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