**The Urgency of Now: Systemic Racism and opportunities in 2021**

**About Glitch:**

Glitch is an award-winning UK charity that is working to end online abuse – particularly against women and marginalised people. We were founded in 2017 by then local politician, Seyi Akiwowo, after she received a flood of abuse when a video of her speech at the European Parliament went viral. Through training, research, workshops and programmes, we're building an online world that is safer for all. We focus our effort on three key areas: Awareness, Advocacy and Action.

**Continued Impact of COVID-19 and increased online abuse for people of African descent in the United Kingdom**

When COVID-19 first hit, we speculated that more time spent at home and on our digital devices would lead to an increase in online abuse. To investigate this, Glitch partnered with the [End The Violence Against Women Coalition](https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/) – a leading group of specialist women’s support services in the UK – and carried out some in-depth research. The result is [‘The Ripple Effect’](https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Glitch-The-Ripple-Effect-Report-COVID-19-online-abuse.pdf): a report that reveals the gendered and racialised impact of COVID-19 and online abuse. We discovered that nearly half of women and non-binary people we surveyed reported experiencing online abuse since the beginning of the pandemic, and that much of this abuse took place on the main social media platforms (despite tech companies’ claims about making their apps safer).

‘The Ripple Effect’ report found that Black and minorities women and non-binary people were more likely experience online abuse during COVID-19 and more likely to report the abuse being worse during the pandemic. 46% of all respondents reported experiencing online abuse since the beginning of COVID-19 (the beginning of COVID-19 refers to the period starting with the implementation of the UK’s lockdown on 23 March.). This figure increased to 50% for Black and minoritised women and nonbinary people. Of all respondents who had experienced online abuse in the 12 months preceding the survey, 29% reported it being worse during COVID-19. Black and minoritised women and non-binary people were more likely to report suffering increased online abuse during COVID-19, with 38% saying that the pandemic had led to increased online abuse.

Respondents were asked what aspect(s) of their identity the abuse they faced was related to. Gender was the most often cited reason for online abuse. Some 48% of respondents reported suffering from gender-based abuse, 21% of respondents reported suffering from abuse related to their gender identity and sexual orientation, followed by 18% for their ethnic background and 10% for their religion and 7% for a disability. Black and minoritised women and non-binary people were almost as likely to be abused based on ethnicity as they were to be abused based on gender, with 46% of Black and minoritised respondents of colour reporting abuse based on gender and 43% based on ethnicity. Black and minoritised respondents were also more likely to be abused for their religion than white respondents. While the sample of nonbinary respondents was too small to draw statistical conclusions, anecdotal evidence shows they overwhelmingly experienced abuse related to gender identity and gender expression (7 out of 11). These findings highlight the need to implement responses that are gender responsive and include an intersectional lens.

The findings of the survey demonstrate the negative impact of online abuse on respondents. Some 34% of respondents reported that the experience of online abuse had had a professional, social or financial impact on them. Black and minoritised women and non-binary people were more likely to face professional, social or financial consequences, with 48% reporting having done so. The experience of online abuse had a deep impact on respondents’ relationship with technology and social media. 68% of white respondents reported that the experience of online abuse had made them feel different about using technology and social media. This figure increased to 78% for Black and minoritised women and nonbinary people.

60% of Black and minoritised respondents experienced abuse on Twitter and 24% on messaging applications, ahead of Facebook and Instagram (both 21%). These findings suggest that specific responses need to be implemented to address the risk of abuse against Black and minoritised communities on certain platforms, and that tech companies and governments must take into account the role of ethnicity in determining risks. The majority of online abuse reported by respondents was perpetrated by strangers - accounts or people that respondents did not know prior to the incident. Some 16% experienced online abuse from acquaintances, 11% from a partner or ex-partner and 9% from a colleague or superior at work.

Respondents reported experiencing negative emotions as a result of the online abuse they had suffered. Anger and anxiety were the most frequently experienced emotions, with 73% of respondents feeling angry and 69% anxious following incidents of online abuse. Black and minoritised respondents were slightly more likely to report feeling anxious than white respondents: 70% compared to 67%

The experience of online abuse led a majority of respondents to modify their behaviour online and adopt defensive mechanisms to avoid experiencing abuse. This adjustment in online behaviour mirrors women’s “safety work” offline. [Liz Kelly and Fiona Vera Gray](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01924036.2020.1732435) define safety work as the set of strategies that women adopt to avoid experiencing violence from men. 87.5% of Black and minoritised respondents said they had modified their behaviour online following incidents of online abuse, compared to 72% of white respondents.

While data samples broken down by specific Black and minoritised communities are too small to draw statistically significant conclusions, anecdotal evidence from the data sample gathered via our survey showed that respondents who identified as Black British, Asian British and from mixed backgrounds experienced online abuse related to gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, as well as their religion. The small data sample we were able to collect highlights the difficulties of conducting research about the experiences of minoritised communities and the need for more funding for this type of study. This investigation - the most ambitious attempt at documenting the impact of COVID-19 on gender based online abuse in the UK - was limited in time and resources and more follow-up research is needed.

The disproportionate impact of online abuse on Black women has been documentented in previous research on online abuse. A 2018 [report by Amnesty International](https://www.wired.com/story/amnesty-report-twitter-abuse-women/) examined tweets sent to 778 UK and US female politicians and journalists, finding that 7.1% of tweets received by these women were abusive or problematic, with Black women 84% more likely to receive such tweets than white women in the study.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, life in the UK has remained under restrictions, with increased internet usage recorded in official figures from [OFCOM](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/220414/online-nation-2021-report.pdf), with adults in the UK reporting that they spend over a quarter of their waking day online.

Social media companies have become increasingly under scrutiny for their role in mitigating the huge levels of online abuse that public figures, such as sports personalities, in the UK face, and this has been particularly prevalent in news headlines around the racist online abuse routinely experienced by Black and miniritised male professional footballers in the UK, culminating in a [football-wide social media boycott](https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/12294547/social-media-boycott-sent-powerful-and-united-message-as-sports-world-reacts#:~:text=The%20football%20world%20united%20across,to%20stop%20online%20discriminatory%20abuse.&text=The%20Premier%20League%2C%20EFL%20and,end%20all%20forms%20of%20abuse.) over the 4 day bank-holiday weekend in May 2021. In response, the [UK Government has](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-laws-to-keep-children-safe-stop-racial-hate-and-protect-democracy-online-published) used the publication of its long-awaited draft Online Safety Bill (formerly known as the Online Harms White Paper/expected Online Harms Bill) to signal its intentions to ensure that the emerging legislation will “clamp down on racist abuse online”.

While the draft Online Safety Bill is awaiting a process of pre-legislative scrutiny before it travels through the UK Parliament later in the year, Glitch’s current concerns are that the bill does not demonstrate how misogynistic and racial abuse and abuse routinely experienced by marginalised communities will be effectively mitigated through this legislation. We believe that enforcement of the bill needs to also be strengthened to make a meaningful difference, particularly to mitigate the abuse that Black women in the public and political eye, as well as in the general population recieve on a daily basis. We want Black communities in the UK to thrive and flourish, not merely survive. This should be seen as the moral and ethical responsibility of a government bringing forth legislation that has the potential to bring about meaningful, systematic change in the UK, which could have repercussions across the world. You can read more on our initial reactions to the draft Bill, published in Grazia, alongside Danny Stone, Chief Executive of the Antisemitism Trust [here](https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/in-the-news/online-safety-bill-major-concerns/).

Online abuse, and particularly, racist online abuse against Black people in the UK has been in the forefront of public discourse through 2021. While tech companies continue to make small tweeks and slight changes to safety measures on their platforms, the systemic and persistent issues around racism, sexism and other discrimination online and offline in the UK have not been meaningfully addressed. For this reason, we do not see any reason to believe that the rate of online abuse aimed at Black people in the UK has decreased in any meaningful way.

Glitch has also been working in partnership with academics Maria Rodriguez (PhD, MSW), Sydney H. Brower, Kauai A. Taylor, Alexander Auyeung to analyse the online abuse that Black women members of the UK Parliament (MPs) received in 2019 in the month leading up to the general election held in December, which is included in full in the [appendix](#_643pwh9ctbai) of this paper. It explores patterns of misogynoir. We found that:

* ***online abuse occurs on a continuum:*** *Language is dynamic, contextual and the nature of colloquial political discourse can often be nebulous in intent, delivery and hidden amongst potentially valid political grievances. It can also be outright and violent.*
* ***as well as navigating abusive content in their own timelines and mentions, many Black women MPs find themselves witnessing or calling out abusive content online, where either they or others are the targets:*** *Happening online and offline, this results in multiple instances of trauma – as witness and target – amounting to unpaid emotional labour within an already complex public life*
* ***For those of us who are working to end online abuse, locating instances of harm can be prohibitively difficult:*** *At best, this work can be done laboriously by pouring through mentions, direct replies and user timelines, allowing for snippets of the interactions reported by survivors of online abuse. Better methods of identifying abuse are desperately needed to enable NGOs to do this work.*

Full findings and recommendations of this work can be found [below](#_643pwh9ctbai).

It is also relevant to note that in 2021, a review set up by the Prime Minister in the aftermath of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests that swept the world, including the UK, which determined that there was no institutional racism within UK society, a point that faced deep criticism in the [UK media](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/31/sewell-report-racism-government-racial-disparity-uk) and across the race organisations, such as the [Runnymede Trust](https://www.runnymedetrust.org/sewell.html) in the UK. The [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974507/20210331_-_CRED_Report_-_FINAL_-_Web_Accessible.pdf) finds that the ‘UK not deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities', a report which this group has called out as it ‘[normalis[ing] white supremacy](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID%3D27004%26LangID%3DE&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1624554581989000&usg=AOvVaw0h7ceDVlCc20Iqk9eDURsa)’.

Glitch is a very small UK charity specialising in ending online abuse against women through an intersectional lens, by raising awareness of the issues around online abuse, advocating for systematic changes and upskilling activists and women through our workshops to better understand safety in the online space, as well as promoting good online digital citizenship as part of a public health approach.

Though we are a small charity working in a global space, we offer free resources and workshops to Black Lives Matter activists, who are using their voices to public speak out against racial injustice. As part of our Black Lives Matter Online Too campaign, we have used our [petition](https://www.change.org/p/social-media-companies-black-lives-matter-online-too) ‘Social Media Companies: Black Lives Matter Online too’, to leverage safety conversations with tech companies around changes to their platforms. We had particular concerns around the impact that watching videos showing violence against Black bodies that were prvelant on social media platforms particularly during 2020, including the murder of George Floyd. [Research](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/05/150506164240.htm) has also shown a quarter of people who see content of violent events develop symptoms akin to PTSD.

There needs to be far more investment in creating a safe online space for people of African descent. We believe that our work is meaningful in this area, though we know that we cannot do this work alone, as the epidemic of online abuse is damaging the fabric of our societies both online and offline. More needs to be done to awaken a generation of good digital citizens, who understand how to have an online presence that will be a positive force to help them achieve their goals both

professionally and personally, and know that thriving in a safe online space is just as much their human right as it is in the offline world.

Appendix:

# Black Women and Online Harms

Exploring Black Women MPs Twitter Experience: A Descriptive Exploration of the 2019 UK Parliamentary Election

Prepared for Glitch

# Authors:

**Maria Rodriguez (PhD, MSW), Sydney H. Brower, Kauai A. Taylor, Alexander Auyeung**

*Please note that this report includes statistics and examples of online abuse and discrimination which some readers may find triggering.*

***About Glitch***

Glitch is a small and dynamic charity with a mission to end online abuse and champion digital citizenship across all online users, advocating for recognition that our online community is as real as our offline one and that we should all be working together to make it a better place. Glitch particularly focuses on the disproportionate impact that online abuse has on women and non-binary people of colour, and is the only UK charity with this area as its primary focus.

Glitch is a registered charity (no. 1187714).

# Executive Summary

The current report culminates an exploratory study of the timelines, mentions, and replies to 14 Black women members of Parliament (MPs) in the UK. The exploration expands upon prior work conducted in partnership with the SafeLAB at Columbia University[[1]](#footnote-1). Data are collected using the Twitter Premium Full Archive API[[2]](#footnote-2) and span the month just before the UK election (November 12th, 2019 - December 12th, 2019). We collect 1,500 mentions for all users, as well as timelines and replies for three (3) MPs of interest, a total of n= 19,500 tweets.

Key Findings

1.  **Though our results are descriptive in nature, we find that online abuse occurs on a continuum, one that we question can be captured with current natural language processing (NLP) methods**. Language is dynamic, contextual, and the nature of colloquial political discourse can often be nebulous in intent, delivery, and hidden among potentially valid political grievance. It can also be outright and violent. We offer examples of tweets which we argue span such a continuum.

2. **We find that, in addition to navigating abusive content on their own timelines and mentions, many Black female[[3]](#footnote-3) MPs find themselves engaged in multiple instances of witnessing or otherwise “calling out” abusive content online, where they or others are the targets of abuse.** Whether online or offline, this phenomenon results in multiple instances of trauma - as witness and target - requiring Black female MPs to engage in unpaid emotional labour within an already complex public life.

3. **Attempting to locate instances of harm using current methods is prohibitively difficult, particularly for NGOs mission driven to address instances of harm and abuse online.** At best, pouring through mentions, direct replies, and user timelines allows for snippets of the interactions reported by victims. Methods which balance the proprietary needs of social media platforms with the public good are sorely needed.

We propose one potential solution to addressing these issues: Pairing content moderator teams with NGOs and applied social scientists whose work specialises in online abuse and harms may support developing APIs and related tools that allow for the successful study and mitigation of harms and abuse on social media platforms. Language is dynamic, abusive language nuanced, and solutions that work for abusive content in more general audiences will likely miss those directed at specific sub-populations, such as those under consideration in this report (see Recommendations for further details).

# Background

There is no single definition of online abuse. Online abuse encompasses a wide range of harmful behaviours. PEN America defines online abuse as “pervasive or severe targeting of an individual or group online through harmful behavior.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Glitch uses the phrase online abuse as an umbrella term to capture a plethora of tactics and harmful acts experienced by individuals online. Online abuse can include - but is not limited to - offensive or discriminatory comments and insults, threats of physical or sexual violence, stalking, harassment, bullying, impersonation, defamation, denial of service attacks, online impersonation, dead-naming, or violations of privacy such as “doxing” (posting private details online such as a person’s address or phone number with the aim to cause alarm or distress) or sharing intimate and private images of a person online without their consent.

Coordinated or organic harassment campaigns targeting politicians, journalists, activists and other public figures are one of the many manifestations of online abuse. The issue of online abuse targeting self-identified female politicians, public figures and activists, has received growing attention in Europe and North America in recent years, and has shed light on the growing political polarisation affecting these regions.

A 2018 report by Amnesty International examined tweets sent to 778 UK and US female politicians and journalists, finding 7.1% of tweets received by these women were abusive or problematic, with Black women 84% more likely to receive such tweets than white women in the study.[[5]](#footnote-5) A report which analysed ‘uncivil’ messages received by US and Canadian politicians found that they received 15% and 11% of abusive messages respectively.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Elections, which represent times of heightened political polarisation, are conducive to increased online abuse. Research has shown that during the 2019 UK general election, candidates across the political spectrum received four times the amount of online abuse two years before. In a highly polarised election, many candidates decided to step down as a result of sustained and intense online abuse.[[7]](#footnote-7)

During the 2020 US presidential election, research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) showed that over 15% of messages targeting female candidates on Twitter were abusive on average, as opposed to 5 to 10% for male candidates.[[8]](#footnote-8) A report by the Wilson Center looking at six different platforms showed that the 2020 elections saw various disinformation and harassment tactics being deployed against candidates.

In Canada, an analysis of online ‘incivility’ and abuse during the 2019 federal elections by researchers at the University of British Columbia found that 40% of tweets received by politicians were uncivil while 16% were abusive. While women and racialised candidates examined in the study did not appear to receive more abuse, the impact of the online abuse on them was stronger due to their lived experience of abuse and harassment offline[[9]](#footnote-9).

In addition to the many reports by civic organisations and advocacy groups, several academic studies have been conducted analysing the pervasiveness of online abuse targeting women in online spaces. Though a full literature review is beyond the scope of this report, we offer several citations here to offer a snapshot of the robustness of the literature and its limitations. Several academic studies have documented and theorised online abuse targeting female politicians in the UK, Canada, and the United States (*see* Collignon & Rüdig (2020); Krook & Sanín (2020); Wagner (2020); Faith & Fraser (2019); Gordon (2019); Rheault, Rayment, & Musulan (2019); Collier, & Raney (2018); Krook (2018a, 2018b); Salter (2018); Harp (2018); Cardy (2017)), but much of this work fails to offer insights concerning the intersection of Blackness, gender, political discourse, and online abuse.

That is, studies that have thus far examined online abuse targeting women identified persons have notably missed the intersections of being a Black woman online (a notable exception is Madden, Janoske, Briones Winkler, & Edgar (2018)). Thus, there remain notable gaps in the understanding of the long-term impact of online abuse on women in the UK, including from Black and minoritised backgrounds.

This research piece is based on initial analysis conducted by researchers from Columbia University School of Social Work’s SAFElab. The researchers identified five self-identified female politicians who had experienced visibly high levels of abuse during the election campaign. The researchers analysed 300 negative Twitter comments directed at Dawn Butler, Helen Grant, Marsha de Cordova, Claudia Webbe, and Diane Abbott between December 7th to 12th, 2019. The report found candidates were targeted online along a variety of dimensions: race, gender, professional acumen, and familial issues. The report also found instances in which candidates were mistaken for other candidates, a phenomenon of anonymisation and depersonalisation that has a long history in racist interactions (Ferguson et al , 2001).

*Policy implications*

Growing awareness of the problem of online harms across Europe has led to intensive legislative action across the continent to find regulatory frameworks for addressing online harms. Germany adopted the NetzDG[[10]](#footnote-10) law in 2017, which forces technological companies to remove illegal hate speech within 24 hours of it being reported. A similar proposal in France[[11]](#footnote-11) was declared unconstitutional by the country’s Constitutional Council.

In April 2019, the UK published details of its Online Harms White Paper (OHWP), outlining legislative proposals for regulating and addressing online harms. The OHWP imposes a ‘duty of care’ on technological companies to address harmful content online, overseen by an independent regulator. The OHWP has been the object of a national consultation.[[12]](#footnote-12) At the European Union (EU) level, the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) policies are providing new legislative frameworks for creating safer online spaces across member states, imposing new sanctions against technological companies if they fail to protect users against online harms.

Following the publication of the OHWP, Glitch welcomed the UK government’s move towards greater regulation while expressing concern that the proposal falls short in addressing the disproportionate abuse faced by women, in particular women of colour, and especially Black women. Glitch has called for the OHWP to include gender and ethnicity in its definition of online harms. This concern has become more pressing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a substantial increase in intersectional abuse.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Online abuse targeting politicians poses a threat to democratic representation. During the 2019 UK general election, 50 women MPs decided to step down from the race, citing abuse as their main reason.[[14]](#footnote-14) With research showing that women of colour are more likely to face high levels of online abuse, the issue of representation is particularly relevant to Black female MPs. The OHWP offers an opportunity to offer greater protection to Black women engaged in politics by recognising the intersectional nature of online harms.

# Data, Methods, & Limitations

Data are gathered using the Twitter premium archive and REST APIs[[15]](#footnote-15). We collected data in three phases. The first phase consisted of collecting the timelines of 14 members of Parliament (MPs) who self-identify as Black. We then collected all mentions of these same MPs between November 12, 2019 to December 12th, 2019. Finally, we collect replies to 5 sample MPs during the same time frame, in order to ensure we collected as much information containing direct conversation between MPs and Twitter users at large. This resulted in a total of 19,500 tweets collected overall.

We then conduct a multi-method content analysis in order to examine communications received by these MPs during the month leading up to the British General election of 2019. We begin by conducting widely employed automated descriptive analyses of text: word frequencies, time series plotting, simple sentiment analysis, as well as word networks to elucidate topics within each MPs dataset. We then leverage structural topic models to superficially cluster themes within each MPs dataset. Word networks and structural topic models are used in social science to cluster the content of text datasets using quantitative methods. For more on structural topic models and how we employ them here, see Roberts et al (2016), Rodriguez & Storer (2019).

This report is limited in several ways. First, the content analysis conducted is limited to one month prior to the election, a time period understood to be crucial to the operation of the election, but notably missing additional months of campaigning, etc. Second, the data collection was limited to 1,500 tweets per MP as a result of using the Twitter Premium archive search API. This API allows for comprehensive retroactive data collection, but is paid for in tiers that prohibit collecting a greater number of tweets during the project timeline. Third, during the course of data collection tweets mentioning Kim Johnson were not found for this time period, despite multiple attempts across a variety of APIs. We are unsure why mentions of this MP are inaccessible, as their handle is active during the time period and their timeline is scrapable using the REST API.

Finally, this project was further constrained due to the dynamic and pervasive effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic. We include at the end a bibliography of related academic research on this subject, should readers be compelled to learn more about the content, effects, and attempted mitigation strategies concerning online abuse and harm.

# Finding 1: A continuum of abuse

We find abusive language towards Black women MPs occurs on a continuum, ranging from disgruntled constituents using unsavory language to personal attacks on the MPs physical, emotional and psychic well-being. We believe this phenomenon to be a specific type of misogynoir, racism uniquely directed at Black women (Bailey, 2018; Bailey, 2016). Online spaces are seen by some as particular breeding grounds for instances of misogynoir (Lawson 2018) and our results support these conclusions. Specifically, we find a percentage of tweets directed at Black women MPs, though the underlying concerns may be civic matters such as legislation votes, to be decidedly violent and personal. Further, we find the line between civic complaint and abuse to be blurry, and as a result question the ability of automated content moderation methods to capture the complexity of this phenomenon. We use the phrase “blurry political complaints” to signal these nuanced tweets within the tables below.

An additional element of online abuse, particularly in the context of minoritized individuals, is that of questioning competence. Competence questioning is a specific kind of microaggression - defined as indirect, subtle and/or at times unintentional discriminatory statements, actions or environments targeting minoritized identities. Often, minoritized individuals who occupy spaces generally reserved for mainstream identities are considered professionally inadequate simply because they have traditionally been excluded from the space. This type of microaggression is particularly damaging in spaces seeking to increase their diversity, equity and inclusion practices, as it is often implicit in the culture of the space in question that certain identities do not belong there as a function of their lived experience (or lack of it).

What follows are examples of tweets gathered from our analysis, which serve to illustrate the nuance and violence of the continuum of abuse we hypothesise. Some MPs are the subject of tweets across all three levels of the continuum, some just 1 or 2. Together, we argue these examples illustrate the range of abusive tweets Black women MPs are subject to, as well as the complex content of the tweets that make them difficult to parse out with automated means.

**Diane Abbott**

*Note: Diane Abott’s experiences as a Black woman MP online are the subject of an independent research study. The citation is as follows:*

Palmer, L. A. (2020). Diane Abbott, misogynoir and the politics of Black British feminism’s anticolonial imperatives: ‘In Britain too, it’s as if we don’t exist’. *The Sociological Review*, *68*(3), 508-523

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| **Type of Tweet** | **Examples** |
| Blurry Political Complaints | What utter rubbish. #AngelaRayner looking as stupid as @HackneyAbbott <https://t.co/TdbtEdzai2>@dungeekin @RabbiZvi @UKLabour @HackneyAbbott "low level" - just like the Labour Party.@BBCBreaking @jeremycorbyn and his wife are heading to Heathrow to ask for asylum there too.@HackneyAbbott doesn't know where Heathrow is.Shame. |
| Questioning Competence and Intelligence[[16]](#footnote-16) | @Telegraph Mabey that's why @UKLabour thought there was a sophisticated cyber attack against them??? They probably just realised it was @HackneyAbbott inputting numbers on a calculator.Who’d you come up with with this idea alongside? @HackneyAbbott ?? We know she’s spot on when it comes to figures...#errr #errr #errrrrWhy would one county warrant a national emergency? Does he know Yorkshire and Surrey are counties or has he been reading the atlas @HackneyAbbott drew with crayons? |
| Scare Tactics | Which Labour MP scares you the most? Women first, see my other poll for men.  Please retweet for a larger sample. Thank you! 🙂.Angela Rayner6.8%Diane Abbott61.7%Emily Thornberry22.4%Rebecca Long-Bailey9.1% |
| Outright personal attack  | @jeremycorbyn Fuck off dick head! Go and shove your beard up @HackneyAbbott arsehole! Fucking pair of clowns 🤡🤡@jeremycorbyn @HackneyAbbott you would bankrupt us in days , you 1950s con man <https://t.co/898W8hstXX>Apparently the attack was "sophisticated and large-scale". Yeah, like a DDoS attack is sophisticated....about as sophisticated as @HackneyAbbott - although she is large-scale |
| Claims of reverse racism | @gdudeyman @HackneyAbbott You don’t seem to like wh\*te people , Diane .@HackneyAbbott Coming from the walrus that said "all white people love to play divide and rule" Fucking hypocrite |

**Dawn Butler**

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| **Type of Tweet**  | **Examples** |
| Blurry Political Complaints  | @DawnButlerBrent Another one talking nonsense and promising the world |
| Questioning Competence and Intelligence | @AyoCaesar @DawnButlerBrent Thanks Dawn for the cringiest moment of the entire election. <https://t.co/xfSerudZTx> |
| Outright personal attack  | @LaboursBlackPLP @DawnButlerBrent Wow - didn’t know that Dawn was that kinky |

**Helen Grant**

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| --- | --- |
| **Type of Tweet**  | **Examples** |
| Blurry Political Complaints  | @HelenGrantMP @ElliotColburn @Conservatives Helen, do you call gay men bum boys too? Is this a general Tory thing nowadays or just a Johnson thing?You’ll find @HelenGrantMP much quicker if you scroll up from the bottom of the worst performing MP’s in parliament. The 28th worst performing MP. That’s pretty good going out of 650. Helen doesn’t care about voters, she doesn’t work for voters, so who does she work for?I am not a Labour supporter but believe in honesty and integrity. Other leaders have exposed themselves to questioning on this. It seems your leader knows that he would be the worst of the lot. The UK going down the toilet pan. Thanks a bunch.@paddydocherty @HelenGrantMP @JamesWillisLD @MaidstoneLibDem Oh yes. Sychophantic photo opp politician. She is a follower of anything that keeps her her husband and close friends on the taxes we pay to her to fund her family lifestyle. Ps. She quit her role, supported her fellow Lawyer Raab, then backs Johnson. The worst of their kind. |
| Questioning Competence and Intelligence | So, one new railway line costs £88bn, but your £500m is supposed to kick start a doubling or more of our current network? There are no words. #stupidisasstupiddoes |
| Outright Personal Attack | That hat still looks ridiculous- have you forgotten your own constituency or are you so convinced that you have thieir vote??I found this rag on my doorstep this morning. It’s now being recycled. You have done nothing for Maidstone, you are lazy and you still claim maximum expenses for a 2nd home. You are a proper Tory, big snout in a big trough |
| Claims of indirect racism | Dear @HelenGrantMP,Please stop posting campaign material to me. This is the third time we have received Tory literature. You will never have my vote as you are a career politician supporting a racist leader and do nothing to represent me. 1/ |

**Marsha de Cordova**

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| **Type of Tweet**  | **Exemplar**  |
| Blurry Political Complaints  | Law grad ""Do-Gooder"" |
| Outright personal attack  | @HackneyAbbott @MarshadeCordova @UKLabour @BellRibeiroAddy How's your son doing? <https://t.co/TwMNGNVqAZ>@HackneyAbbott @MarshadeCordova @UKLabour @BellRibeiroAddy Absolutely brain dead cunt |

**Claudia Webbe**

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| **Type of Tweet**  | **Exemplar**  |
| Blurry Political Complaints  | @ClaudiaWebbe You have chosen a position in public life and you are standing for election, the public have a Democratic right to hold you to account for your actions and your words. To suggest that anyone who is critical of you is harassing you is is undemocratic and deeply sinister. |
| Questioning Competence and Intelligence | @BellRibeiroAddy @HackneyAbbott @UKLabour @abenaopp @ClaudiaWebbe @NadiaWhittome @ApsanaForPL If we are all equal why push race issues? |
| Outright personal attack  | @ClaudiaWebbe Youre a liar and an apologist for antisemites, you are complicit in the abuse that your party has thrown at the Jewish community isn’t the last few years. On a day that that abuse has been made public you’ve chosen to show zero empathy or contrition and tried to make it about you |

# Finding 2: The unpaid emotional labour of Black Female MPs

A second finding of our descriptive analysis concerns the unpaid emotional labour Black Women MPs engage in within online spaces. Emotional labour is defined by Arlie Russell Hochschild as “the silent work of evoking and suppressing feeling—in ourselves and in others” (Hochschild, 2015). Unpaid emotional labour, then, can be understood as uncompensated scaled management of public emotional experiences, and the subjugation of one’s own emotional life in service to the management of emotions in others. Often, these Black female MPs are called to bear witness to and intervene in instances of racism, misogyny and other -isms as a function of their public online life: the extent to which other MPs are called to similar service is unknown. Previous research has highlighted the impact of online abuse on elected politicians’ daily lives and described the emotional burden of tackling online abuse that they face.[[17]](#footnote-17) Due to the positionality of the MPs highlighted here (i.e. Black, woman identified, public servants) we argue that emotional labour is a neglected avenue of inquiry in terms of its potential to produce new or exacerbate existing trauma for the MP as well as their audience. Further, we note there are several instances in which the MPs Twitter audience brings attention to this labour by calling out specific themes/users within the MPs timeline.

We offer a few examples below.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **MP(s)** | **Example 1**  | **Example 2**  | **Categorisation** |
| Diane Abbott | @cheesesauce @jaquelinea1958 @HackneyAbbott Why do racist white men like u follow Diane Abott?🤔 | [**tweet by MP**] Tory candidate faces calls to quit over 'disgusting racism' <https://t.co/HOQdIqeAr1> | Audience bringing attention to emotional labour |
| Dawn Butler  | I'm wearing my @bpositivechoir Hoodie in memory of Simone Kerr who was murdered by her ex partner. @UKLabour will implement a strong Domestic Abuse Bill. 2 women every week are killed by their partner or ex partner. It is time for #RealChange <https://t.co/Gh24Q7MGMb> |  | Call to bear witness or intervene |
| Diane AbbottMarshade Cordova | @HackneyAbbott @MarshadeCordova @UKLabour @BellRibeiroAddy Once again the hate consumed #racists are at it. Just ignore the idiots Diane  |  | Audience bringing attention to emotional labour |
| Claudia Webb | @anika4u @Kiran11172565 @ClaudiaWebbe @Guyton\_Day @DMUConservative @Conservatives @Young\_Tories @dmuleicester Your limited vocabulary where you resort to calling people items of confectionary is really boring me now and I have a Labour government to canvass for in the interests of the many and not the few, so I’ll bid you farewell at this point | @ChigzPatel @ArunSha98726064 @LampMiners @ClaudiaWebbe @UKhindumatters That’s with the police and is under investigation for hate crimes against me by British Hindu Voice. I’ve already told you that. There is also a case with solicitors. I’m tagging Leicester police now, because you have been warned several times @poncyvaper @leicspolice[[18]](#footnote-18) | Call to bear witness or intervene |
| **MP audience witnessing their Emotional Labour**  |  |
| Example 1 | Yep! It's also a reminder of how resilient Black women are despite the historical bigotry. Black sistas are on the march!!! @abenaopp @FloEshalomi @ClaudiaWebbe @BellRibeiroAddy @IAmApsanaBegum...all heading to @HouseofCommons. Nancy is turning in her grave! <https://t.co/T4bwigCNkm> | Audience bringing attention to emotional labour |

# Finding 3: The suitability of current methods and tools to support identifying online abuse and harms

While methods to detect online abusive language have proliferated in recent years, we argue that several limitations prevent them from scaling appropriately. For example, Waseem & Hovy (2016) note many methods to classify hate speech require lists or dictionaries, as hate speech, as all language, is dynamic and contextually specific. This assertion is born out in other research on the problems with classification and detection of hate speech/abuse on online platforms (see, for example: Corraza et al 2020; Teh, Cheng & Chee 2018; Gao & Wang 2018; Salminen et al. 2018; Zhang, Ziqi and Luo 2018; Davidson et al. 2017; Silva et al 2016). This phenomenon complicates efforts to move interventions forward because it precludes real-time detection: dictionary based approaches are retrospective and are destined to become obsolete as social norms and platforms change. Further, words mean different things in different contexts (i.e. countries, languages, etc.) and our ability as a society to identify these terms in real-time and at scale is overwhelming.

Our results showcase some of this complexity of language. In the following snippet, the derogatory term alluded to would likely not be captured in any automated process:

*“*Your limited vocabulary where you resort to calling people *items of confectionary*…”

Putting aside the history of racism in the candy industry,[[19]](#footnote-19) we argue the nuance of abusive language in online spaces is likely to always outstrip the capacity of even the most sophisticated algorithmic interventions. As a result, we argue that online spaces, especially social media platforms, should develop a multi-stakeholder approach to content moderation that relies on experts inside and outside of the platform to support civil discourse. This team approach would add depth to the most advanced cross platform abusive language detection methods, such as Salminen (2020).

Specifically, we call on social media organisations to partner with NGOs, applied social scientists invested in the public good, and each other to develop contextualised approaches to content moderation that allow for real-time classification of online abuse. This approach, we believe, mitigates the limitations of many technological approaches by facilitating real-time interventions.

# Summary

In this report we call attention to the specific ways in which abuse manifests online for Black women MPs, and hypothesise this population would best be served by collaborative teams consisting of NGOs, applied social scientists, and social media platforms. This team approach to online abusive content detection would mitigate the limitations of existing interventions by ensuring pertinent, real-time context is added to any platform’s content moderation strategy. Further, though our results are exploratory, they point to key intractable issues within the moderation of content targeting Black women online. Misogynoir, the racist phenomenon which intersects gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, is an emerging area of social scientific inquiry which requires social media platforms to center an often neglected user group. The prevalence of misogynoir in online platforms also suggests that any content moderation strategy must include an intersectional frame - a deep understanding of the ways in which gender, race, socio-economic status, and country-context combine - in order to successfully balance speech freedoms with user well-being.

# Recommendations

# This brief sheds light on the need for tech platforms to give greater consideration to the online experiences of Black women, including public figures and for the government to acknowledge the specificity of Black women’s experiences online in digital regulation policies. Glitch’s recommendations in this respect are as follows:

*Tech companies*

# Tech companies need to provide greater transparency about their content moderation policies, including investment in AI and human content moderation, the type of content removed and the nature of the complaints received. Tech companies should share anonymised and disaggregated data with trusted partners and research organisations to inform public understanding of the nature of the content targeting users. This is particularly important for Black women in public life who face disproportionate abuse and are the recipients of a wide range of harmful behaviours that target various aspects of their identity.

1. Tech companies need to ensure their content moderation teams are diverse (particularly with regard to lived experience), appropriately resourced and trained to understand the nuances of abusive language and to ensure that content moderation does not deepen racism and algorithmic bias. Such content moderation teams should have unfettered access to mental health resources, as ample evidence suggests content moderation takes an exacting toll on the mental health of workers[[20]](#footnote-20). Platforms need to be transparent about the resourcing of and support and training offered to their moderators.

# Platforms need to take more steps to reduce abusive and harmful behaviour and adopt measures to protect Black women in public life online, including by implementing mechanisms that give users greater control over their settings. Tech companies should be transparent about the steps they take to protect public figures on their platforms, who are at risk of facing increased levels of abuse, and what mechanisms are put in place to reduce the unpaid labour undertaken by victims of online abuse.

1. Tech companies should cooperate with civil society organisations working to end online abuse and online harms - including those concerned with Black women’s experiences online. Tech companies should meaningfully consult with these organisations to inform their responses to online harms and their platforms’ policies and remunerate these organisations appropriately. Platforms’ policies should be regularly updated to reflect the changing nature of online abuse targeting users with intersecting identities.
2. Tech companies need to consider partnering with NGOs working to end online abuse, trusted research institutions and academic experts, particularly in the field of computer and social sciences, to develop APIs and content moderation tools that allow for the successful study and mitigation of harms and abuse on their platforms. Language is dynamic, abusive language nuanced, and solutions that work for abusive content in more general audiences will likely miss those directed at specific sub-populations, such as those under consideration in this report. Consideration also needs to be given to how this type of partnership can be financially supported by tech companies and how academic and civil society’s support can be appropriately resourced.

*UK Government*

1. The government should make requirements for content moderation transparency from tech companies a priority through the OHWP. The regulator should be given power to enforce these transparency mechanisms. The experiences of Black women online need to be recognised in governmental approaches to digital regulation. In particular, the OHWP should include gender and ethnicity in its definition of online abuse.
2. The nexus between mis and disinformation and abuse and the ways in which disinformation and deceptive tactics such as deep fakes and altered images can be deployed to cause harm to women involved in public life needs to be recognised as a key area for policy-makers. The OHWP offers an opportunity to acknowledge the harmful impact of malign disinformation on victims and the need to offer legislative responses to this phenomenon.

*Civil society organisations and researchers*

1. NGOs and researchers working to end online abuse should apply an intersectional lens in their analysis of online abuse and should work together to develop contextualised approaches to content moderation that allow for real-time classification of online abuse.

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3. We use the term “female” throughout this report, though we recognize gender is fluid. At any time, the reader can substitute the term “female” in this report with “female-identified” and our conclusions hold. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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18. This tweet is an instance of an MP attempting to dissuade a troller from continuing their attack on twitter. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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