

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

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Mark Zuckerberg
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Facebook, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Sheryl Sandberg
Chief Operating Officer
Facebook, Inc.
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg and Ms. Sandberg,

As you know, women in public life make our democracies stronger, more representative and equitable. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that countries and localities led by women leaders tend to fare better in their outcomes. Unfortunately, women in politics face pervasive sexism, hate, harassment, and threats of violence on your platform that make it more difficult for them to succeed in public life. We are imploring Facebook to do more to protect the ability of women to engage in democratic discourse and to foster a safe and empowering space for women.

According to a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, "... social media have become the number one place in which psychological violence – particularly in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats – is perpetrated against women parliamentarians." In fact, nearly 42 percent of women parliamentarians reported seeing extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of themselves spread through social media. Another recent study determined that in the United States, women elected officials were attacked more often than their male counterparts by fake news accounts, and that these attacks were more likely to be focused on personal traits or character.¹ For example, one sitting female Senator was attacked for not being authentically black or American.

¹ Lucina DiMeco, #ShePersisted: Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World, the Wilson Center, 2019.
<https://www.she-persisted.org/>

A growing body of evidence shows that women politicians around the globe are facing a deluge of gender-based attacks online, mixing weaponized hate and disinformation with the anonymity provided by social media to destroy women's reputations and push them out of public life. Globally, women politicians report facing extremely humiliating or sexually-charged images of them spread through social media. Women politicians of color and those who belong to religious minorities are at even greater risk of becoming targets.

Attacks against women on social media include a diversity of malicious behaviors, including sharing manipulated images, false news stories, personal information, and sexualized profiles. These attacks use impersonation, humiliation, doxing, stalking, electronic surveillance, and threats of violence. They play on common sexist tropes, portraying women as unlikable, emotional, unqualified, and dumb.

Make no mistake, these tactics, which are used on your platform for malicious intent, are meant to silence women, and ultimately undermine our democracies. It is no wonder women frequently cite the threat of rapid, widespread, public attacks on personal dignity as a factor deterring them from entering politics.

In order to protect the voices of women, we ask Facebook to start doing more to enforce its own rules. In particular, Facebook should:

- Quickly remove posts that threaten candidates with physical violence, sexual violence or death, and that glorify, incite or praise violence against women; disable the relevant accounts, and refer offenders to law enforcement;
- Eliminate malicious hate speech targeting women, including violent, objectifying or dehumanizing speech, statements of inferiority, and derogatory sexual terms;
- Remove accounts that repeatedly violate terms of service by threatening, harassing or doxing or that use false identities to attack women leaders and candidates; and
- Remove manipulated images or videos misrepresenting women public figures.

In addition, Facebook should:

- Stop the amplification of gendered disinformation on your platform. Much of the most hateful content directed at women on Facebook is amplified by your algorithms which reward extreme and dangerous points of view with greater reach and visibility creating a fertile breeding ground for bias to grow.

These are steps Facebook can take right now, and they could not be more urgent. Women are increasingly running for office, and national leaders have recognized the need for more women to be elected officials. Additionally, the pandemic has reduced direct social interaction and increased our reliance on social media for information and dialogue on politics and news. In this context, it is past time to take a stand, and safeguard online spaces to allow all voices to be heard without manipulation, harassment, or intimidation. Our democracy, women, and countries around the globe depend on it.