

The Dangers of Sexist Rhetoric on Social Media (2016-2021)

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Attacks against Female Politicians and Candidates in the U.S. and Germany Pose a Threat to Democratic Freedom and Human Rights

This year, Angela Merkel's term as chancellor will come to an end, concluding a historic period in German politics. Although Merkel broke numerous barriers as Germany's first female chancellor, great inequality between the sexes still endures worldwide and women are still underrepresented in global politics. Importantly, Merkel's time at the nation's helm has seen the rise of Facebook and the founding of social media giants Twitter and Instagram, among others. The inception of these sites has been a double-edged sword for women in politics. On one hand, these online forums have allowed politicians to speak directly to their constituents, elevating female voices that are often not covered in mainstream media; now, female politicians can choose what they say online and when they say it. But on the other hand, social media has become an echo chamber of sexist rhetoric directed at female candidates and politicians, amplifying existing discriminatory language as well as encouraging additional misogynistic attacks. To make things worse, most social media sites allow the veil of anonymity. Users can post under aliases or through anonymous accounts, creating a perfect opportunity for uncredited chauvinism and hatred (often without repercussions). Of course, sexism is not a novel phenomenon, but new social media channels have essentially created a 24-hour news cycle for sexist commentary.

While social media platforms are also a forum for critiquing male candidates, women are significantly more often the targets of extreme rhetoric such as online abuse, harassment, and gendered defamation. In fact, a 2016 survey of female parliamentarians worldwide found that 42% of respondents had seen "extremely humiliating or sexually charged" images of themselves shared on the internet.¹ Furthermore, a study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that social media is the number one place in which psychological violence is perpetrated against women parliamentarians, particularly in the form of threats, misogynistic remarks, and humiliating images.² Sexism on social media is even more commonly directed against female candidates that are from minority groups (racially, religiously, etc.), are under 40 years old, are highly visible in the media, and advocate for progressive policies and/or women's rights.³

¹ "Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians," Inter-Parliamentary Union, Oct. 2016, <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>

² "Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians"

³ Lucina Di Meo and Saskia Brechenmacher, "Tackling Online Abuse and Disinformation Targeting Women in Politics," Carnegie Endowment for National Peace, 30 Nov. 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics-pub-83331>; <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, in-person channels for discourse are limited. Thus, social media and other online channels have taken on a new significance in the past year to fill a void in the public sphere, especially in conversations around politics. Without normal campaign events or physical spaces for discussion about elections, many people have turned to social media to both voice their opinions and seek answers to their political quandaries. Online channels, however, are rife with disinformation and sexist rhetoric. So social media, despite its many benefits, thus holds the power to erode democracy. Earlier this year, German Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht described this phenomenon at the Safer Internet Day Conference; she cited a YouGov survey conducted on behalf of her ministry that found that almost one third of social media users have already come into contact with fake news, incitement, hate postings or threats—a larger percentage of which is likely related to politics and/or gender.⁴ Because social media companies profit off of how much time users spend on their sites, their algorithms arguably favor eye-catching content that attracts and holds users, which is often also the most inflammatory.

Questions about the harms of sexist rhetoric on social media are especially important in the U.S. and Germany, in particular. For the first time, the United States has a female vice president, Kamala Harris. Now filling the highest political position of any American woman to date, Harris has faced relentless, often misogynistic, scrutiny on social media. Across the Atlantic in Germany, such questions are also timely as Annalena Baerbock, the only female candidate in the 2021 race to succeed Merkel, is facing numerous challenges to her character and questions surrounding her qualifications. Many of these allegations are so blatantly gendered that even her male competitors, the CDU/CSU's Armin Laschet and the SPD's Olaf Scholz, have called the attacks inappropriate and unfair.⁵

Human Rights Implications of Sexism on Social Media

Gendered disinformation campaigns often manifest in fake stories, threats, and humiliating images (often altered) in an attempt to frame female candidates as inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, or too emotional or sexual to hold office.⁶ These sexist narratives online have the potential to distort public understanding of female politicians' track records and policies, thus posing the ability to change voters' decision at the ballot box. Additionally, misinformation and extraneous critiques on can also discourage women from seeking political careers in the future and can negatively skew social perception of *all* women.⁷ The deliberate degradation of female candidates thus violates core tenets of universal human rights: the worth of the human person and the equal rights of men and women.⁸

Sexist rhetoric directed at female candidates not only affects the subject but the larger population. Research shows that other women who read or overhear misogynistic language online also suffer poor self-esteem.⁹ But men and those not on social media also feel the influence of sexism. To borrow from the United Nations Human Rights Council, the erosion of women's

⁴ Matthias von Hein, "Demagogues, digitalization and the threat to democracy," Deutsche Welle, 10 Feb. 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/demagogues-digitalization-and-the-threat-to-democracy/a-56524810>

⁵ Joseph Nasr, "Greens candidate for German chancellor says sexist scrutiny holding her back," Reuters, 8 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/greens-candidate-german-chancellor-says-sexist-scrutiny-holding-her-back-2021-07-08/>

⁶ Di Meco and Brechenmacher

⁷ Lucina di Meco and Kristina Wilfore, "Gendered disinformation is a national security problem," *Tech Stream*, Brookings Institute, 8 Mar. 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/>

⁸ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble

⁹ Ritu Prasad, "How Trump talks about women – and does it matter?" CNN, 29 Nov. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50563106>

human rights “is a litmus test for the human rights standards of the whole of society.”¹⁰ Once women’s rights begin to crumble, especially in the political sphere and in popular discourse, other rights are also in jeopardy.

Among the gendered remarks levied at female candidates are often threats of abduction, rape, or murder of the women and/or their families. Such attacks intend to deter female candidates from entering politics.¹¹ One anonymous European parliamentarian recalls, “Once, over a period of four days, I received more than 500 threats of rape on Twitter.”¹² While most of the messages on social media are only empty threats that seek to intimidate, there have been instances where such rhetoric has led to real-life violence.¹³ One notable example is when right-wing militias coordinated last year the intended kidnapping of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Democrat) through Facebook private groups. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] arrested the men before they could carry out the intended attack, but the militia’s unlawful plan highlights how misogyny online can turn into actual violence against women. The militia’s Facebook pages did not contain just a few extremists, but rather involved hundreds of thousands of users across pages and became an “echo chamber of sexism and violence” against Whitmer and other female leaders. Those planning the attack (mostly men online) were especially angered at Whitmer because they despised that a woman was telling them what to do by enforcing COVID-19 restrictions. Few online sought recourse through formal channels, for example evoking a recall election or petitioning the government, and instead jumped to violence. One reporter that infiltrated these radical Facebook groups noted, “it’s more common to see misogynist comments than substantive criticism of policy.”¹⁴

Beyond this Michigan militia, other adversarial groups have also used widespread attacks on female candidates and politicians as a weapon in their favor. Both private actors and state-sponsored organizations have utilized malicious, misogynistic tactics to silence women and further inequality. For example, Russia has notably tried to interfere with and spread disinformation in both the U.S. and Germany’s elections. Sexist posts, including those from Russian agents, intentionally aim to undermine democracy. Such attacks thus inherently pose a national security threat and violate human rights.¹⁵ In one such display of aggression online following Harris’ vice presidential nomination in 2020, disinformation posts were shared at

¹⁰ “Report of the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and practice,” Human Rights Council, *United Nations: General Assembly*, 14 May 2018, <https://un-docs.org/A/HRC/38/46>

¹¹ “Democratic Women’s Caucus, Speaker Pelosi Send Letter to Facebook Demanding it Stop the Spread of Gendered Disinformation and Misogynistic Attacks Against Women Leaders,” *Press Releases*, The Office of Congresswoman Jackie Speier, 6 Aug. 2020, <https://speier.house.gov/2020/8/democratic-women-s-caucus-speaker-pelosi-send-letter-to-facebook-demanding-it-stop-the-spread-of-gendered-disinformation-and-misogynistic-attacks-against-women-leaders>

¹² “Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians”

¹³ “Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians”

¹⁴ Malachi Barrett, “Sexist attacks cast Michigan Gov. Whitmer as mothering tyrant of coronavirus dystopia,” *M Live*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2020/05/sexist-attacks-cast-whitmer-as-mothering-tyrant-of-coronavirus-dystopia.html>

¹⁵ “Democratic Women’s Caucus, Speaker Pelosi Send Letter to Facebook Demanding it Stop the Spread of Gendered Disinformation and Misogynistic Attacks Against Women Leaders;” “Tackling Gendered Disinformation & Online Attacks Against Women in Politics,” *#ShePersisted Global*, Accessed: 18 August 2021, <https://www.she-persisted.org/>

least 3,000 times per hour.¹⁶ Similarly, Germany has been the target of 700 Russian disinformation cases since 2015—more than any other country in the European Union.¹⁷ Some experts believe Baerbock, in particular, has been the victim of Russian disinformation campaigns, especially since she has been an outspoken critic of the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Germany and Russia.¹⁸ Cem Özdemir, a former Green party leader and current foreign policy expert, said, “In order to prevent the Greens from entering the government no means are beyond the Kremlin.”¹⁹

An Overview of the U.S. and German Contexts

Research with a global sample size has illustrated prejudice against women online, and the same is true at the national level in the United States. One 2019 study determined that American female elected officials were attacked more often than their male counterparts by fake news accounts, and that these attacks were more likely to focus on personal traits or character than policy or electability.²⁰ The same was true in a study that examined the 2020 U.S. congressional races specifically.²¹ On Twitter, 15% of all messages to female Congressional candidates were abusive, while only 5-10% of messages to their male counterparts were.²² In the same election cycle, female Democrats running for office received ten times more abusive comments on Facebook than male Democratic candidates. The gap was narrower (2:1) for Republicans. Similar gender disparity on social media has been documented in regional elections in India, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and Zimbabwe.²³ At the highest level of government, the U.S. presidency, the same sexist trends exist. Lucina Di Meo, a Global Fellow at The Wilson Center, examined Twitter conversations around each Democratic presidential candidate between December 2018 and April 2019 using data analytics.²⁴ She found that not only are female candidates targeted disproportionately with negative messaging, but the social media narratives around them focus primarily on issues of character, identity, physical appearance, and sexuality. In contrast, critical social media posts about men instead relate to their profession.

Germany, too, is no stranger to the spread of gendered discrimination on social media. In February, *Der Spiegel* found that 69% of female members of parliament in Germany had experienced “misogynistic hatred as members of the Bundestag.”²⁵ Serving at the highest level of German government does not make women immune either. Merkel is no stranger to social media smear campaigns, so Baerbock was aware she too would likely be subjected to such

¹⁶ di Meo and Brechenmacher

¹⁷ Gabriela Baczyńska, “Germany is main target of Russian disinformation, EU says,” Reuters, 9 Mar. 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-russia-germany/germany-is-main-target-of-russian-disinformation-eu-says-idUSKBN2B11CX>

¹⁸ Mathieu Foulkes, “German Green’s election hopeful targeted by fake news,” Agence-France Presse, 28 April 2021, <https://au.sports.yahoo.com/german-greens-election-hopeful-targeted-061330478.html>

¹⁹ Kate Connolly, “Suspected Russia-led cyber campaign targets Germany’s Green party leader,” The Guardian, 13 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/13/suspected-russia-led-cyber-campaign-targets-germanys-green-party-leader>

²⁰ Lucina Di Meo, #ShePersisted: Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World, the Wilson Center, 2019. <https://www.she-persisted.org/>

²¹ Di Meo and Brechenmacher

²² “Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians”

²³ Di Meo and Brechenmacher

²⁴ Suyin Haynes, “Female 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidates Face a ‘Gender Penalty’ Online, Study Finds,” TIME, 5 Nov. 2019, <https://time.com/5717376/female-democratic-candidates-2020-twitter-study/>

²⁵ Kate Brady, “Germany: Annalena Baerbock becomes prime target of sexist hate speech,” 10 May 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-annalena-baerbock-becomes-prime-target-of-sexist-hate-speech/a-57484498>

attacks. Experts note that to sexist internet trolls Baerbock is an especially large target given that she is the first Alliance 90/The Greens' chancellor candidate, has been outspoken on progressive issues, and is relatively young.²⁶ While some attacks about Baerbock have been about her purported policies now shown to be false (a ban on pets and barbecues, forcing the study of the Quran in schools, etc.), most gendered posts target solely her character and qualifications.²⁷ One German journalist argues that the seemingly endless, gender-based attacks on Baerbock are intentional to keep negative headlines in people's minds ahead of the election and flip their votes to her detriment.²⁸

Character: Denigrating Extremes

By denigrating a female candidate's character on social media, internet "trolls" seek to paint women as unsuited to lead. Often either extreme is painted as negative. For example, people on social media may critique a woman who is "too loud" as overbearing or overly ambitious (this attack is often levied at Harris), while a woman "too quiet" is weak or a poor leader.²⁹ There is no right outcome through this sexist lens. Men, in contrast, are rarely subject to such critiques and are often instead praised for the identical character traits.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump was one high-profile perpetrator of such gender-based character assassination on social media. Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign he took to Twitter to rant about Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Among his favorite attacks was painting Clinton as "weak," stating on she has "no strength or stamina" (Nov. 20, 2015) and is thus "unfit to serve as #POTUS" [President of the United States] (Sept. 08, 2016). Trump posited that she has "bad judgment and temperament" (May 26, 2016) and "ISIS, China, Russia and all would love for her to be president" (May 20, 2016).³⁰ Connecting her energy and mood to foreign policy is quite the jump and likely an attack that would not have been made against a man. Trump here plays on antiquated tropes of women as less strong (physically and mentally) than men and led by emotion, perpetuating false stereotypes that are then retweeted my thousands. Such accusations are incongruous, however, with Trump's other favorite portrayal of Clinton as "crooked Hillary." It seems hypocritical that she can be "weak" and dependent while also, to paraphrase his words, a conniving mastermind worse than any man. But to Trump and many of his followers, the characterizations—even if at odds with each other—caught on. Beyond Trump, other commentators on social media criticize Clinton for her lack of "likability" and dwelled on her "shrill" voice—both factors only tangentially related to her ability to serve as president, yet also now levied against Baerbock.³¹

²⁶ Damien McGuinness, "Annalena Baerbock: Woman who could be Germany's next chancellor," BBC, 19 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56798783>.

²⁷ Foulkes; Derek Scally, "Bild tabloid leads anti-Green campaign ahead of German election," The Irish Times, 14 June 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/bild-tabloid-leads-anti-green-campaign-ahead-of-german-election-1.4593223>

²⁸ "Vorwürfe gegen @Die_Gruenen-Kanzlerkandidatin @ABaerbock...", WDR Aktuelle Stunde (Twitter), 29 June 2021, https://twitter.com/aktuelle_stunde/status/1409953861654224902

²⁹ Nora Tarte, "With a female vice president in office, has media gender-bias left the presidential campaign trail? The short answer is no, and the reason why is deep rooted," *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, Apr. 2021, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=journalismprojects>

³⁰ Giusy Scotto di Carlo, "Trumping Twitter: Sexism in President Trump's tweets," *Journal of Language and Politics*, Research Gate, Jan. 2020, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338610423-Trumping-Twitter-Sexism-in-President-Trump%27s-tweets>

³¹ Susan Milligan, "A Historic Day, a Familiar Refrain," U.S. News & World Report, 14 Aug. 2020, <https://www.usnews.com/news/elections/articles/2020-08-14/kamala-harris-faces-familiar-sexist-remarks-after-joining-the-ticket>

U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (Democrat-California) is also a frequent target of online, gender-based character assassination. One now infamous video shared on social media in 2019 depicted her as impaired and stumbling over her words in attempt to paint the Speaker as mentally incompetent—similar to the rhetoric questioning Clinton’s stamina. News outlets quickly revealed that the video of Pelosi was an edited “deepfake” (another attack common against female candidates), but the clip had already picked up over 2.5 million views on Facebook and still circulates today.³²

In another display of extremes, candidates like Clinton have been demonized online for being too experienced and thus “part of the establishment.” But now, Baerbock is critiqued for her lack of experience, despite having been a member of the Bundestag since 2013 and party member since 2005. To further this false portrayal of Baerbock as inexperienced, many on social media have also questioned whether or not she truly received a degree in international law from the London School of Economics.³³ In reality, Baerbock passed an M.A. with distinction, yet this inaccurate theory still circulates. Again, no matter what the female candidates do and where they fall on the spectrum of experience their character is criticized, while men are lauded for having the same background and demeanor.

Commentators have also dissected Baerbock’s credibility and honesty, blowing up minor inaccuracies in her CV, delayed taxes on a Christmas bonus, a slip of the N-word, a picture with billionaire financier George Soros, and allegations of plagiarism in her book (among other headlines) into major scandals. Together, these deliberate attacks on Baerbock intend to frame her as intelligent and underserving of leadership. In an ARD interview, Baerbock apologized for the CV errors, saying “I obviously made a mistake, and I am very, very sorry. Because we should be focusing on other more important issues at this point in time.”³⁴ As she implies, social media users should focus on her policies—the “important issues”—not these gendered attacks. It is hard to assume that a male candidate would have faced the same continued scrutiny. For example, Armin Laschet also has slight inaccuracies in his CV— he omitted his somewhat scandalous resignation from a lectureship at the RWTH Aachen University—yet few online have dwelled on this exclusion.³⁵

Identity: Overemphasizing Gender, Race, and Motherhood

In addition to attacks on character, research shows that disinformation about and criticism of female candidates disproportionately dwell on their identities. Often these characteristics (race, age, etc.) are unchangeable, so critiquing identity is largely unproductive. In contrast, criticism of policy may actually lead to tangible reforms.

³² Associated Press, “I never said that! High-tech deception of ‘deepfake’ videos,” CBS News, 2 July 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/i-never-said-that-high-tech-deception-of-deepfake-videos/>; “Doctored Nancy Pelosi video highlights threat of ‘deepfake’ tech,” CBS News, 26 May 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/doctored-nancy-pelosi-video-highlights-threat-of-deepfake-tech-2019-05-25/>

³³ Matthew Karnitschnig, “German Greens leader Baerbock under fire for resumé inflation,” Politico, 5 June 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-greens-leader-annalena-baerbock-under-fire-for-resume-inflation/>

³⁴ Rina Goldenberg, “German Green party candidate Annalena Baerbock under fire,” Deutsche Welle, 7 July 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-green-party-candidate-annalena-baerbock-under-fire/a-58192858>

³⁵ Philip Oltermann, “Personality continues to trump policy as German elections loom,” The Guardian, 8 June 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/08/personality-continues-to-trump-policy-as-german-elections-loom>

In both the U.S. and Germany, there is often the false assumption on social media that parties select female candidates *only* for their gender. Despite Baerbock earning The Greens' nomination near unanimously months ago, some social media users still argue for her replacement with party's male co-leader, Robert Habeck.³⁶ Similarly, some online believe that the Alternative für Deutschland Party [AfD] only chose Alice Weidel as their co-leader in order to fill an implied gender (and sexuality) quota.³⁷ Others on social media improperly allege that U.S. President Joe Biden only chose Harris to join his ticket as a display of tokenism for her sex (and race).³⁸ Attacks on all three women ignore their years of experience and incorrectly reduce them to a single aspect of their identity.

Focusing on gender identity also often encourages a focus on other aspects of identity, namely narratives on race. During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the dominant story on social about Democratic candidate Elizabeth Warren focused not on her political platform, but on her race—in particular that she “lied” about her Native American ethnic heritage.³⁹ Similarly, the dominant story about Harris focused on her half-Indian and half-Jamaican ethnicity and identity as a child of immigrants. These identifiers often manifested on social media in incorrect assertions that she is thus “not authentically American.” In contrast, it is exceptional for critical storylines about male candidates to mention their character and identity—especially if the male candidates are white.

While the race card is not used against Baerbock—a white, German woman—one trope she does face is the critique of mothers. Baerbock is the mother of two young daughters, born in 2011 and 2015. Social media users (as well as mainstream journalists) frequently question whether she would be able to balance both jobs, mother and chancellor, directing antiquated tropes like “*Rabenmutter*” against her.⁴⁰ Although many male candidates also have young children (the CSU's Markus Soder for example has children only slightly older), few men are asked about their work-life balance. To emphasize this double standard, if anything, men who do have children are praised for their compassion as a family-man and their ability to provide.⁴¹ As mentioned before in regards to the extremity of experience, women are also demonized no matter where they fall on the spectrum of maternity. Some social media users see those with children, like Baerbock, as unable to manage both roles, while women without children are painted as uncompassionate.⁴² For example, a search of “Angela Merkel” on any social media will yield unfounded assertions that her lack of biological children means she has no stake in Germany's future. No matter the women's decision on whether or not to have children, users find a way to vilify and invalidate female candidates and politicians and forge tentative links to women's supposed electability.

Physical Appearance: Do Clothes Affect Policy?

While the clothing, hairstyles, and weight of male candidates rarely make headlines, such commentary about female candidates is a constant on social media feeds and often has mal-

³⁶ Nasr

³⁷ Ute Leimgruber, “Hostility toward Gender in Catholic and Political Right-Wing Movements,” *Religions* 11, no. 6: 301. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11060301>

³⁸ “NC Congressman Murphy Tweets Harris Picked For Color, Race,” WFAE 90.7, 8 Oct. 2020, <https://www.wfae.org/politics/2020-10-08/nc-congressman-murphy-tweets-harris-picked-for-color-race>

³⁹ di Meco and Brechenmacher

⁴⁰ Sonya Angelica Diehn, “Opinion: Germany's backward vision of working mothers,” Deutsche Welle, 12 April 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-germanys-backward-vision-of-working-mothers/a-57272831>

⁴¹ Liz Plank, “More male politicians need to talk about fatherhood like Justin Trudeau,” Vox, 25 Mar. 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/25/11306990/justin-trudeau-fatherhood>

⁴² Nasr

intent. Online trolls on both sides of the Atlantic frequently extrapolate about women's looks to create faulty evidence against their fitness for office.

For example, during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, social media users commented on whether or not Clinton was "smiling too much or hadn't smiled enough" in the debates, and many ignored her policy points completely to instead dwell on something so superficial.⁴³ The 2020 election saw much of the same. Trump himself wrote on Twitter that Democratic candidate Amy Klobuchar has "bad timing, she looked like a Snowman" (Feb. 10, 2019).⁴⁴ The attack itself was sexist and mean but also uncalled for given that her timing and appearance have no bearing on her presidential abilities.⁴⁵ This objectification of women has also become somewhat predatory. After Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Democratic-New York) shared her personal financial struggles, *Washington Examiner* reporter Eddie Scarry tweeted a picture of her wearing an "expensive" coat (Nov. 15, 2018).⁴⁶ A Capitol Hill staffer had taken the picture of Ocasio-Cortez from behind without her consent—in essence demonstrating through example that it is okay to follow and harass female politicians.

For the past two decades, Merkel has faced much of the same rhetoric dissecting her appearance. Social media has called her signature look (the three-button blazer) frumpy, plain, and boring.⁴⁷ In one particular instance, photographers snapped pictures of sweat stains beneath Merkel's armpit as she waved to journalists on the red carpet outside an opera house. Some on social media extrapolated to assume that the sweat was caused by Merkel's stress over her inability to make sound decisions on the economy—an attack almost never made on her male counterparts despite their similar sweat marks (something completely natural for both sexes).⁴⁸

Katharina Wrohlich of the German Institute for Economic Research DIW posits that Baerbock is "an easier and more obvious target of gender bias and sexism than Merkel" because she is "younger, has longer hair, wears dresses and skirts."⁴⁹ In my own browsing of social media, I found numerous accounts dedicated to denigrating The Green Party and Baerbock, in particular. Multiple users fixated upon her appearance—some stating that they would vote for her based on her looks, while others said she did not look "enough like a politician" and that her images featured too much retouching (also present in male candidates images, although ignored). Both gender-based viewpoints, whether lauding or denigrating Baerbock's looks, place too much focus on her external appearance rather than her policy and electability.

Sexuality: Relationships, Fake Nudes, and Distracting Comments

Another unfortunately common trope on social media is the placement of female politicians' relationships under a microscope, in turn framing women as willing to use their sexuality to get ahead. While running for president, it came to light on social media that Harris had long-ago dated former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown. Some social media users then suggested,

⁴³ Catherine Wylie, "Sexist slant in media representation of women 'needs to change,'" *Independent*, 20 Dec. 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/sexism-latest-theresa-may-meghan-mar-kle-hillary-clinton-angela-merkel-everyday-sexism-laura-bates-a7501491.html>

⁴⁴ Clara Martinez, "Gendered Media Representations in International Relations: Part 1," *Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy*, 17 Feb. 2018, <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/journal/2018/1/19/gendered-media-representations-in-international-relations-part-1>

⁴⁵ Scotto di Carlo

⁴⁶ Chris Bell, "Journalist criticized for 'sexist' Ocasio-Cortez tweet," *BBC*, 16 Nov. 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-46233260>

⁴⁷ Martinez

⁴⁸ Nasr

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

often with crude language, that Harris used the romantic relationship to unfairly benefit professionally, calling into question her honesty and credentials.⁵⁰ Weaponizing relationships almost always denigrates women, asserting that women’s personal and professional relationships cannot be compartmentalized, while the same is not true for their male counterparts. For example, Brown received no equivalent backlash.

Baerbock’s sexuality has also been used as a weapon against her. A Russian disinformation campaign found and circulated fake images purporting to show her naked, but the pictures were actually a foreign porn star that shared a resemblance with The Green’s leader—but it was not Baerbock herself.⁵¹ Nevertheless, damage on social media has been done, and the disinformation campaign depleted Baerbock credibility and presented “her” as overtly sexualized.

The same phenomenon is true on the other end of the political spectrum in Germany. A male AfD colleague, Petr Bystron, suggested that Corinna Meier would be a better a pole dancer than an MP.⁵² These allegations went viral on social media, resonating with and entertaining online trolls. The attacks, however, not only unfairly harmed Meier’s reputation, but the message from such a high-profile man (from her own party for that matter) implicitly condoned further attacks on women’s appearance. This gendered-allegation perpetuates the Madonna-Whore dichotomy: the assumption that women should only be stay-at-home caretakers or sex workers—with no in between.⁵³ This antiquated view of women does not allow for women to enter the public sphere and perpetuates old-fashioned views of power and gender.

Not only are sexual-based allegations embarrassing and uncalled for, but these such sexist attacks can get in the way of the flow of more important information about policy. Shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Gretchen Whitmer began regular state-of-the-union updates for her constituents in Michigan. These speeches were streamed online in addition to being shown on television, but the feeds on social media included a comment section. “The comments, which largely remained anonymous, ranged from critical to lewd, honing in on the fit of the dress, the governor’s body, and debating whether her fashion choices were appropriate for the venue. None of the comments featured in the Fox article mentioned Whitmer’s policies or politics.”⁵⁴

What Next?

Ultimately, sexist rhetoric on social media is not only mean and largely unsubstantiated, but it has larger effects on society and government as a whole, interfering with the democratic process. Women are already underrepresented in politics worldwide, and gender-based online

⁵⁰ Milligan

⁵¹ Connolly

⁵² Angelique Chrisafis, Kate Connolly, and Angela Giuffrida, “From Le Pen to Alice Weidel: how the European far-right set its sights on women,” *The Guardian*, 29 Jan. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jan/29/from-le-pen-to-alice-weidel-how-the-european-far-right-set-its-sights-on-women>; Oliver Daddow and Isabelle Hertner, “Interpreting Toxic Masculinity in Political Parties: A Framework for Analysis,” SAGE Publications, 25 Nov. 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819887591>

⁵³ Orly Bareket, et al., “The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy: Men who perceive women’s nurturance and sexuality as mutually exclusive endorse patriarchy and show lower relationship satisfaction.” *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 79(9-10), 519–532, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0895-7>

⁵⁴ Alejandra Salazar, “Governor Gretchen Whitmer Won’t Stand For Sexist Comments About What She Wears,” *Refinery 29*, 16 Feb. 2019, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/02/224637/michigan-governor-gretchen-whitmer-sexist-article-dress>

attacks (whether focused on character, identity, appearance, sexuality or any other sexist topic) has the dangerous potential to push women out of politics or lead them to disengage from online political discourse in ways that harms their political effectiveness. As the Carnegie Endowment writes, "For those women who persevere, the abuse can cause psychological harm and waste significant energy and time, particularly if politicians struggle to verify whether or when online threats pose real-life dangers to their safety."

And these threats are only growing as social media becomes an increasingly entrenched part of twenty-first century life and new forums for charged rhetoric emerge. Many extremist groups and those trapped in disinformation bubbles are now migrating to new online sites to avoid regulation beyond the mainstream Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Unregulated conspiracy sites such as QAnon or private messaging apps, namely WhatsApp and Telegram, are thus the new front in this war against sexist rhetoric on social media.⁵⁵ According to Joachim Allgaier, a professor of communication and digital society at Fulda University of Applied Sciences, "We have no idea what's happening [on these new social media sites], and the tone there is perhaps a bit sharper and more aggressive than in the more broadly-used platforms."⁵⁶

So what can politicians and the public do to protect global democracy and women's rights?

Women who are the subjects of social media attacks are often encouraged to "take the high road" and ignore their dissenters, but new research shows that female candidates actually see an uptick in their popularity when they instead call out such rhetoric.⁵⁷ When female candidates respond and assert that these sexist attacks are unacceptable, it can not only recover her perceived credibility but also improve her likability. It is unfair, however, to place the burden solely on the female candidates and politicians. As Susan Douglas, a feminist cultural critic and professor at the University of Michigan, notes of women's experiences: "You don't want to make charges of sexism because it makes you look like you're whining. It makes you look like you're complaining. It makes you look like you're pulling the gender card...She doesn't want to be seen as a victim."⁵⁸ Thus, we cannot rely on self-defense and social media counter attacks alone. Larger societal and legal change needs to be made to both prevent further sexist rhetoric and remove existing misinformation and gendered criticisms.

Some efforts have been made across the globe to hold social media companies more accountable for regulating harmful speech, including sexist rhetoric, on their sites, but such patchwork measures are largely insufficient.⁵⁹ Governments should pressure social media companies to take a tougher stance against all forms of harassment, including that against women and other marginalized groups, on their platforms and to work towards greater transparency and accountability. While transparency has improved in recent years with the emergence of self-reported statistics on content moderation efforts and associated policy decision, this still ignores the larger question of algorithmic systems and design decisions themselves affecting outcomes relating to abuse and encourage sexist harassment.⁶⁰ In order to encourage the

⁵⁵ Connolly; Foulkes

⁵⁶ von Hein

⁵⁷ Keida Kostreci, "Study: Social Media a Double-Edged Sword for Female Politicians," VOA, 22 Nov. 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-politics/study-social-media-double-edged-sword-female-politicians>

⁵⁸ Barrett

⁵⁹ Di Meo and Brechenmacher

⁶⁰ Cécile Guerin and Eish Maharasingam-Shah, "Public Figures, Public Rage," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Public-Figures-Public-Rage-4.pdf>

positive aspects of social media and mitigate the negatives, it is integral that the public, campaigns, and governments understand how to minimize sexist posts, algorithmic decision-making, content moderation, and complaints and redress available.

As Lucina Di Meo has advocated, the EU's Digital Services Act and Biden's proposed National Task Force on Online Harassment and Abuse would be steps in the right direction if implemented effectively.⁶¹ Christine Lambrecht has also encouraged that Germany tighten its laws against hate speech and incitement to include limits on sexist rhetoric online, allowing individuals and social networks to report posts immediately to the Federal Criminal Police.⁶² As Deutsche Welle notes, it is questionable, however, whether her proposed additional protections will come into force before the 2021 elections.⁶³ All three plans are productive steps towards facilitating both the deletion of harmful content after it is posted online and regulation that curbs abuse in advance.⁶⁴

Another important piece in driving out sexist rhetoric is counter messaging. TIME'S UP Now started #WeHaveHerBack in response to the 2020 election cycle; this social media campaign encourages users to post positive, truthful messages and images about women in politics in order to call out and clarify disinformation circulation.⁶⁵ Ultimately, education through accuracy-oriented social media campaigns and in articles like this is the first step towards acknowledging the existing issue of sexism on social media and in, in turn, prompting change. By understanding current bias and widespread misogyny online users can browse more consciously, will be able to better spot common forms of disinformation and hate, and thus will be less likely to succumb to believing and rebroadcasting false allegations.

⁶¹ "The Digital Services Act package," European Commission, Accessed: 25 August 2021, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>; "The Biden Plan to End Violence Against Women," *Joe Biden Platform*, Accessed: 25 Aug. 2021, <https://joebiden.com/vawa/>

⁶² von Hein

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ "Too ambitious. Too angry. Too persistent. Too old. Too young. *Nasty*. We're putting the news media on notice: no more sexism in political coverage," TIME'S UP, Accessed: 25 August 2021, <https://timesupnow.org/work/we-have-her-back/>