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Investigating the role of social media abuse in gender-based violence: The experiences of women police officers

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Abstract

Online abuse communicated via social networking sites has increased considerably in recent years, with a significant amount of pejorative communication targeted at women. This mixed methods research study investigates the online abuse received by women police officers in the course of their work. The study considers how the abuse received in the online space echoes other forms of gender-based violence, drawing upon evidence gathered from semi-structured interviews with serving senior police officers in England and Wales. The research has devised a seven-element framework to demonstrate that the online abuse directed at women is misogynistic, frequently includes violent threats and dismisses female contributions to online discussions. The study also reveals that the abuse directed at women varies significantly, depending on occupation, with women police officers more likely to receive abuse that questions their ability or criticises their appearance.

Keywords

Feminist methods, gender-based violence, misogyny, online abuse, policing, social media

Introduction

Online abuse communicated via social networking sites has increased considerably in recent years (Vera-Gray, 2017), and criminal justice and other social policy agencies have been slow to respond to the immense change that has occurred as a result of the way that individuals interact in the digital space (Jane, 2017). The emerging nature of

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the phenomena has created a policy vacuum, with evidence suggesting that a lag in institutional responsiveness leaves victims without adequate protection or recourse (Jane, 2017).

While there has been some research considering the experiences of women working in public facing occupations (e.g. Marshak, 2017), few studies have specifically analysed the online abuse of serving police officers.

This research draws upon the findings of a mixed methods study into the online abuse faced by women police officers. In doing so, it considers how the abuse received in the online space echoes other forms of gender-based violence. It uses qualitative empirical research gathered from interviews undertaken with women police officers, along with an interdisciplinary review of the literature.

The research has devised and applied a seven-element framework to demonstrate that the online abuse directed at women in public facing occupations is misogynistic, frequently includes violent threats and dismisses female contributions to online discussions. The study also reveals that the type of abuse directed at women varies depending upon their occupation. While this study confirms the findings of previous research (e.g. Chen et al., 2020; Krook, 2020), that female politicians and journalists are frequently the target of violent threats online, this research reveals that women police officers are more likely to receive abuse that questions their ability or integrity, or which criticises their appearance. Ultimately, the findings of this study emphasise that online abuse is not just about image, political opinions, religious belief or sexual orientation, but it is about gender and is the consequence of being a woman on the internet.

This research uses the insights gained into the online abuse experienced by women police officers, to increase understanding of the challenges associated with navigating the online space. It contrasts these potential harms with the benefits that can be gained from operating professionally online, before outlining a series of recommendations to improve this situation, at a personal, organisational and societal level, not only for police officers, but for women across public facing occupations.

Methods

This research study draws upon the findings of a larger mixed methods project that investigated the online experiences of women employed in four major public facing occupations. The research project undertook 50 semi-structured interviews with women employed across politics, journalism, academia and policing. This article considers a subset of this evidence provided by seven senior police officers. A comprehensive review of the literature, combining a traditional thematic approach and an interdisciplinary scoping review, was also undertaken. This combination of research methods provided an overview of the relationship between online abuse and gender-based violence, while also enabling a greater insight to be gained of the situation faced by senior women police officers in England and Wales.

This research adopts an explicitly feminist perspective, making a deliberate decision to focus solely on the online experiences of women. While a number of studies exist that focus on the online engagement of both men and women in public facing occupations (e.g. Binns, 2017; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020), there is a robust rationale for excluding

men from this analysis. First, there is the finding that women's online experiences are overwhelmingly underpinned by misogyny and gendered discrimination (Poland, 2016). Second, as is illustrated in both the literature review and the empirical evidence, there is a clear link between online abuse, gender-based violence (Salter, 2017) and the misogynistic aim to silence women's contributions in the public sphere (Mantilla, 2015). While men in politics (Bardall, 2011), journalism (Binns, 2017) and academia (Veletsianos, 2016) may also experience threats of violence, they do not do so because they are men. The gendered characteristics of the online abuse received by women mean that to include men in this sample would risk creating a 'false symmetry between men's and women's experiences' (Krook, 2020: 107). Furthermore, insisting on a gendered comparison of experiences risks drawing potentially misleading conclusions, while also ignoring the very real risks navigated by women on a daily basis (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017).

Research questions

The impetus for this research comes from the observation that online abuse is frequently part of serving in a public facing occupation. The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which social networking sites have perpetuated a permissive climate towards gender-based violence, and to identify and analyse the wider impact that such online abuse can have. The objective of the study was to gather a range of empirical and interdisciplinary evidence to make recommendations to address the problems arising from online abuse, which can then be implemented across the public sphere.

The aims and objectives of the research are operationalised as two research questions: (1) How are women police officers are targeted online? and (2) What effect does online abuse have on interactions with the digital world?

Empirical data collection

Data was gathered from seven semi-structured interviews that took place with senior women police officers between January 2020 and June 2020. All are either currently or have previously been active in the online space. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Ethical constraints and guarantees around anonymity provided to participants do not enable information to be provided regarding the operational rank of interview participants, as this would likely lead to their identification. However, these interviews account for a significant proportion of the women officers currently serving at a senior position across England and Wales, where 14 women currently hold the position of Chief Constable (Hymas and Boycott-Owen, 2021). Previous research has confirmed that gaining access to senior women police officers is challenging (e.g. Brown et al., 2019; Rabe-Hemp, 2008), due to their small numbers and the rank held (Marpsat and Razafindratsima, 2010).

Small sample sizes are a common problem in elite interviews, where limited numbers frequently preclude quantitative analysis (Gray and Jones, 2016). However, as is shown in the contributions provided in this article, the depth of response in answer to questions about online abuse is strong (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002), and therefore worthy of attention.

Recruitment of police officers to participate in the research was undertaken via the social networking site, Twitter. While a relatively new method of enlisting research participants (Mannix et al., 2014), this means of recruitment has progressed rapidly (Hokke et al., 2020), and there is a growing recognition that the 'integration of social media into daily life . . . makes it disconcertingly easy' (King et al., 2014: 246), as well as a cost-effective (O'Connor et al., 2014) way for social science researchers to contact possible participants.

Once participants were recruited, snowball sampling was used to recruit further interviewees (Sturgis, 2016). This was a successful strategy and emphasises the informal networking mechanisms that women in public facing occupations create and maintain.

The adoption of a semi-structured interview format enabled a wide-ranging discussion to take place with each participant (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). Given the nature of the interview format, a rigid data collection instrument was inappropriate, and instead, a range of topics were introduced as the conversation evolved, including misogyny, sexual harassment, the role of women in policing and possible policy solutions. These topics were guided by the literature (e.g. Beard, 2015; Jane, 2017; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017; Mantilla, 2015).

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data, using the Braun and Clarke (2006) model, confirmed that receiving online abuse is widespread throughout policing. All the women interviewed had received pernicious communication, the overwhelming majority of which was perceived to be gendered. The wider study of women across the public sphere revealed that the nature of the abuse differed by occupation, with politicians and journalists most likely to receive physical threats, and police officers more likely to be the subject of negative comments regarding their appearance, competence or integrity. A malign focus on appearance has parallels with the gendered view of policing integral to police culture (Brown et al., 2019). Such communication was regarded by interviewees as hugely damaging, with the potential to hamper occupational advancement. The sheer scale of this abuse, when coupled with its impact, is dangerous at a number of levels. For individuals, police officers frequently recounted that being exposed to online abuse can take a huge emotional toll, as Caitlin explained:

> It does have an impact, a really big impact, which I have to watch actually, on my family, particularly on my daughter. She literally searches my Twitter account every day. So, she doesn't just look me up, she looks up what people are saying about me and . . . she really worries. The long-term effects on people like her are really profound. (Caitlin, Senior Police Officer)

Abuse is also damaging at an institutional level, as policing and other public facing occupations risk losing highly experienced staff members, as they leave the profession in response to the abuse they have encountered. This was clearly illustrated in the number of women Members of Parliament (MPs) who chose to leave the House of Commons at the last General Election (Watson, 2019). Moreover, it is not an exaggeration to describe online abuse as a potential threat to democracy, as it may stop women from choosing to take on positions of power and responsibility and acting confidently within them.

Literature review

This study comprehensively interrogated the literature in this area, undertaking both a traditional thematic review and a scoping review of the most recent research. Employing these two methods had distinct advantages. Undertaking a thematic literature review enabled a broad historical perspective to be gained of the landscape of occupational experiences of women police officers, while adopting the scoping review approach provided a systematic analytical framework with which to investigate the broad and interdisciplinary nature of the research. By combining both techniques, it was possible to gain an understanding of both the historical and the contemporary corpus.

Numerous studies (e.g. Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021; Walby and Joshua, 2021) have confirmed that the occupation of policing is both highly gendered and male dominated (Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021). While research on the online abuse of women police officers is scant (O'Connor, 2017), there is a significant body of literature that confirms that the presence of sexist attitudes and behaviour in the physical space is an enduring feature of the occupational culture of policing (Brown et al., 2019). Rawski and Workman-Stark (2018) define the four key features of police culture as 'show no weakness, strength and stamina, put work first and dog-eat-dog competition' (Rawski and Workman-Stark, 2018: 608), which also dictates that police officers who do not adhere to these cultural norms are excluded, particularly when not masculine, heterosexual and white (Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021). The prevailing presence of police culture is resistant to the presence of women officers (Brown, 1998), who are often expected to undertake aspects of police work that are focused on family or community issues (Rabe-Hemp, 2008). The enduring nature of such gendered assumptions means that when women successfully navigate the many hurdles to reach a senior level within policing, they are often viewed as violating two social norms, in relation to gender and rank (Brown et al., 2019). When male officers perceive women's occupational advancement as being in defiance of police culture, the ensuing resentment can lead to sexual harassment (Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021), as men seek to protect their traditional status within the gender-based hierarchy (Berdahl, 2007).

The scoping review of the literature assessed the profusion of interdisciplinary literature published in this area between 2000 and 2020, using a highly systematic methodology. Undertaking this exercise revealed how the existing literature defines online abuse and led to a better understanding of the recommendations advocated to tackle it.

The scoping review demonstrated that an overwhelming majority of the studies selected defined online abuse as a structural issue ($n = 52/61$), stressing that online abuse is a manifestation of gender-based violence. The literature also evidenced the role of misogyny in the perpetuation of online abuse.

Findings: The experiences of police officers

Analysis of the empirical data identified seven pervasive elements of online abuse. The first three are drawn from the Chemaly and Sussman (2020) typology of online abuse, and are emotional harm, defamation/libel and harassment. The other four represent four

facets of underlying misogyny, namely silencing (Salter, 2017), belittling/undermining, criticism of physical characteristics (Mantilla, 2015) and threat (Jane, 2017). Consolidating these seven elements of online abuse in this form provides a novel representation of and explanation for the online abuse directed at women in policing.

Receiving online abuse has multiple impacts. One consequence that has attracted limited consideration is the effect that online abuse can have on an individual's professional standing within their occupation and the wider community in which they work. Having a strong professional reputation is important for all employees. However, this process of reputation building is particularly crucial for women, as they seek to break through the 'glass ceiling' (Palmer and Simon, 2010: 22) to secure gender equality (Aaltio et al., 2008). To achieve a position of power and authority and then risk having that standing undermined by online abuse is hugely damaging. As work by Silvestri and Tong (2020) has confirmed, the relative absence of women in leadership roles within policing across Europe reaffirms the challenge that women police officers still face in reaching senior levels within the profession, despite a concerted effort to address the issues of sexism and the wider pervasiveness of police culture (Loftus, 2009) highlighted by Heidensohn almost 30 years ago (Heidensohn, 1992).

The questioning of an individual's integrity can occur in the form of both direct accusation and as an implied slur. Whether made implicitly or explicitly, the articulation of allegations was frequent, and often felt relentless:

> [I receive online abuse] basically challenging my ethics, or the way I operate, or neglected duty, those sorts of things. (Ruth, Senior Police Officer)

As well as questioning their integrity, women also found their professional abilities under constant scrutiny:

> [There are] a number of accounts, all of them anonymous who literally every time I say anything, say I'm stupid, I'm naïve, that . . . the comments I make on behalf of the organisation are inaccurate. There's a very targeted commentary every time you say anything, we're going to say to you you're wrong. (Caitlin, Senior Police Officer)

Long before the advent of online abuse, Berg and Budnick (1986) highlighted how the traits of competence and technical proficiency were more likely to be assigned to male officers, confirming once again the enduring nature of sexism within policing (Brown, 1998), as evidenced by Caitlin.

Another characteristic of the online abuse that participants shared was the sheer nastiness of many of the comments they received:

> There were some who almost pretty much any time I put a tweet out, would give me some sort of sneering comment and wind people up. Every time you tweet the negatives, you get a whole load of bile, basically. The abuse was misogynistic, it was absolutely vitriolic . . . it was horrific. (Sylvia, Senior Police Officer)

It is worth noting that while not as common, police officers still occasionally received abuse that led them to fear for their personal safety.

> My role as Hate Crime Coordinator and the abuse [I received] . . . I was fearful of further abuse. (Thomasina, Police Officer)

The evidence provided by Thomasina highlights an unintended consequence of the police using social media as a mechanism for communicating with the public (Walby and Joshua, 2021). As O'Connor (2017) confirms, by using online platforms as a way of providing information, individual officers may find themselves in the position of being 'risk communicators' (O'Connor, 2017: 900), which in turn jeopardises their safety and well-being.

In addition to the emotional effort of managing online abuse, dealing with the amount of communication received is hugely time consuming:

> It was just sort of relentless. I think there was something like seven or eight thousand responses, most of which were negative. (Rebecca, Senior Police Officer)

Research by Walby and Joshua (2021) highlights how the Canadian police force uses social media platforms as a way of improving their engagement with the community, while also seeking to increase their legitimacy. However, as both the empirical evidence collected as part of this study and the work of O'Connor (2017) suggest, the intention of police communication online is often the provision of information, rather than attempting to engage in a dialogue with the public. This assumption from the police fundamentally misunderstands the nature of social media sites, which operate upon a premise of engendering a greater openness with the public (Wessels, 2010). By adopting a model of one-way communication, the police service as an institution frequently chooses to ignore the public's response to its online activity (O'Connor, 2017). While the organisation may choose to operate its social media communication in a unilateral manner, this is not always equally adhered to by the public, who may wish to create and maintain an online dialogue. In the event of such a communication mismatch, the responsibility for providing a response to individual members of the public may fall to individual officers. The constant online availability often demanded (Antunovic, 2019) of police officers, as described by Rebecca, is not always beneficial.

The empirical data demonstrate that a significant amount of the abuse that police officers receive online focuses on their physical characteristics. This echoes the work of Brown (1998), which highlighted that some 60% of women police officers had received comments from male officers that criticised their appearance.

The literature on online abuse recognises that a focus on appearance is frequently central to the abuse that women receive (e.g. Backe et al., 2018), primarily as a consequence of sexism and a wider misogyny (Jennings and Coker, 2020), of the type that exists within policing (Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021). This appears to be particularly applicable to women at senior ranks within the police service, whose professional role routinely expects them to interact with the media, or to have their image featured on publicity material:

> It's just an obsession with commentating on how you look all the time. With me, I've had a group of trolls, who became really obsessed with my front teeth. I've got really wonky front teeth, and every time I post anything, they did a zoom in of my teeth and circled them and commented on them. It was really quite bizarre. (Caitlin, Senior Police Officer)

> People comment about your looks . . . the clothes that you're wearing, your hair, your eyes. So, I've had all of that. But then when you start then to get the stuff like, look at her hair, look at you know, whatever it might be, look at her lazy eye, look at this, look at that, you start to look at it and think, I don't really want to look at this. And so you've just got to ignore it. Or whether there'll come a point when we all go, you know what, I'm going to come off social media. I can see that being a world that we live in at some stage. (Rebecca, Senior Police Officer)

Sometimes, the focus on a woman's appearance appeared to have more malevolent intent, driven by a desire to discredit or humiliate:

> Then there are the groups that are about appearance . . . when pictures have been taken of me in Downing Street, they try and zoom in on my badge and try and catch you out to see if you've exposed something that you shouldn't expose, either about your body or the post. (Caitlin, Senior Police Officer)

> And then there's been some real vitriol, and when I look around, and we talk a lot about this as women Chief Officers in policing, when I look around some of the real high profile things that have happened . . . You know, and it's just, it's often around someone's competence linked to their gender, and very much how they look. (Alison, Senior Police Officer)

> Nor did I think it's possible that my hair would be discussed as much as it was. And then it manifested in that people felt the need to complain about me, make a complaint about me to the offices of the Police and Crime Commissioner. The bit that I remember more than anything else was that people said I've got no standards and I was letting the police down by the way I was dressed. (Ruth, Senior Police Officer)

This disparagement of women officers confirms the work of Brown (1998), which suggests that sexual harassment of women police officers is 'going underground' (Brown, 1998: 280) and becoming more implicit, as the police seek to emphasise their improved diversity (Walby and Joshua, 2021). The abuse that Ruth referred to was recalled by other police officers in their contributions:

> How dare they judge her by her appearance when she's utterly capable and able, and I felt very indignant about that, and it was further evidence to me of the venom that there is and the incapacitating nature of that type of trolling. (Sylvia, Senior Police Officer)

Age and ageing were also weaponised by perpetrators engaging in online abuse, with the criticism of older women becoming yet another target for the opprobrium of physical characteristics. This strand of abuse sought to disparage women's competence as they got older.

> Something about being a women in a senior position, I think is . . . you rarely see that abuse [directed at] men who just happen to be, I don't know, grey and wrinkly. Does that abuse go out there? No, I don't think so. If there was a senior policeman who was grey and wrinkly, I don't think it'd get mentioned. Yet women who are in senior positions, it seems ok to either go, 'cor, she's hot stuff', at one end of the spectrum, and that would seem appropriate, or at the other end, whatever amount of abuse you want to dish out, as to how somebody looks. (Rebecca, Senior Police Officer)

This is consistent with the work of Pickard (2020) and Lewis (2020), who both highlight the castigation of older women as a central component of modern misogyny. Research by Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2021) adds a further dimension to consideration of this area of abuse. The work by Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir (2021), which considers the attitudes of serving police officers in Iceland, found that young men, especially those newly recruited, were the group most likely to hold sexist attitudes towards female colleagues. It is proposed that this occurs as a consequence of these officers seeking to reassert male dominance within policing, fearing that any move towards greater equality could pose a threat to their own occupational advancement (Steinþórsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2021).

Denigrating the work of female police officers through belittling is different from other forms of online abuse, as it lacks the obscenities, and other overtly discriminatory tropes that can be identified as abusive by either text filters or human moderators. Nevertheless, this type of malign communication has a clear purpose, namely, to undermine public confidence in the women tasked with making important decisions, and as a consequence it can be hugely damaging:

> You have to balance the benefit of tweeting out and informing people as to what it is that we are up to as an organisation, against being the subject of ridicule, abuse and so on. I think there's this army of armchair warriors, mainly looking out for women that are opinionated and intelligent and an expert and looking to comment in a negative way. (Sylvia, Senior Police Officer)

> Something I've been subjected to is, 'God this is what happens when you put a woman in charge'. (Caitlin, Senior Police Officer)

> Women are much, much more circumspect, in my experience, around their activity, about what they are prepared to share, and what they're prepared to comment on. So, therefore, in my experience it would be that women's voices are quieter. (Alison, Senior Police Officer)

When viewed collectively, the silencing of women has a greater consequence than removing the voices of influential women from the online space. The act of silencing may also prevent police officers from forming the networks that are essential to both tackling online abuse and making successful professional progress.

Interviewees revealed how the abuse they had received, and that they had witnessed, became a mechanism for self-censorship, and led some to ultimately withdraw from online activity:

> For my mental health. I don't need it. I am the sort of person who will read what people tweet back in reply, and I don't need the rubbish really, so I just turned it off. (Sylvia, Senior Police Officer)

> I no longer use Twitter in a professional capacity . . . because of the online abuse I have received in the past, in my capacity as Hate Crimes Officer. (Thomasina, Police Officer)

> If I tweet out and then people are scornful or sarcastic, then your friends and family can see that, and, that's an inhibiting factor of and in itself, isn't it? (Sylvia, Senior Police Officer)

But the decision to withdraw from the online space was not without consequence:

> I certainly know many people who would be personally affected by some of the things that have been said to me. I kind of did withdraw. I didn't do anything. I stopped notifications for a short amount of time, I stopped doing things for a couple of months. I've gone a bit quiet on Twitter and [my followers] they go no, please come back again. I don't post huge amounts to be fair, I have considered it [leaving the online space], but it's what's expected of me in my job, I think. (Rebecca, Senior Police Officer)

The opposing demands of career obligations and emotional well-being meant that occasional breaks from social media were more common than complete withdrawal, giving women the opportunity to prioritise their mental health, while still engaging online.

> So, I have had colleagues say to me that if they were me, they would have shut down the account by now because your job doesn't require you to put up with this level of abuse. Just withdraw. I've never got to the stage with Twitter where I've thought I'll withdraw completely. But there have been periods of time where I've gone a bit quieter, where I've felt that the public noise and angst has risen to a degree, when I thought I don't actually want to be in the middle of this frenzy, so I've gone a bit quieter and just retweet stuff. (Caitlin, Senior Police Officer)

The evidence provided here reveals how the attempt to silence the voices of police officers is an integral part of the misogyny that underpins online abuse. Silencing is different from other forms of online abuse, as it operates in a more insidious manner, coercing women to silence themselves, or to remove themselves from the conversation by leaving the online space. The silencing of women's voices is multi-faceted and can be demonstrated both overtly and implicitly.

The empirical evidence further confirms that women routinely find support and encouragement online, before, during and after episodes of online abuse (De Kimpe et al., 2020; Hodson et al., 2018). Specifically, women police officers create their own coping strategies for dealing with this dimension of misogyny, by forming alliances with other women in the force:

> I try and do quite a lot of calling out of that [online abuse]. So, when I, see there's been a little cadre of retired ex-police officers who've really taken against a woman on Twitter who I actually rate and know quite well, I've got permission to do it, I direct messaged her and said, look this has just got to stop, are you ok if I call them out, and she was like, oh, I'd be over the moon if you did. (Caitlin, Police Officer)

Caitlin's contribution allows parallels to be drawn with the literature, which records that some 70% of women officers have been subjected to some form of sexism (Brown, 1998) in the course of their work. The empirical evidence presented here reveals that sexual harassment has found a new mechanism for dissemination online, and not that the presence of gendered abuse is itself a new phenomenon.

> We know it is what it is, [online abuse] we deal with it for what it is, you know, women are far from isolated, and actually there's something, when I talk to colleagues who've suffered it and

> come out the other side, they say there's something hugely affirming about how many supportive messages they get, how much action is taken that they don't have to ask for, so that you don't feel alone when it's going on, and that's really affirming actually. (Alison, Police Officer)

However, many contributors to this research were keen to stress that being active in the online space was also beneficial:

> As the [name of position], there's something about that figurehead role . . . which has an authority which we can use really wisely. I have a voice which I want to use. (Rebecca, Senior Police Officer)

Caitlin highlighted why it is important for police officers to be active online:

> You want to be listened to, understood, and actually you want to get an engendered, genuine debate on things that really matter to the public. (Caitlin, Senior Police Officer)

By viewing online abuse through the seven separate lenses of defamation and libel, emotional harm, harassment, physical characteristics, belittling and undermining, silencing and threat, the scale of the situation faced by women police officers is quantified. Adopting these lenses also enables the divergence in the types of abuse sent to women holding different positions within the public sector to be readily identified for the first time.

Recommendations for policy change

To have the best opportunity of precipitating effective change, policy developments in the area of online abuse must occur at three levels – the personal, the organisational and the societal.

At an individual level, there is a need for increased digital literacy, to enable women to manage their online presence in a safer way. This could become part of careers education at schools and universities, to arm women with the technical skills that they require to tackle the abuse that they are likely to receive, while simultaneously communicating that it is not acceptable to use online platforms in a derogatory or threatening manner. This process of online awareness and education must continue after young people have left formal education and entered the workplace, as an integral part of regular continuous professional development (CPD) to ensure that women at all ages and stages of their career have the skills necessary to navigate the online space. Simple techniques, such as blocking, muting and reporting mechanisms, which often vary according to platform, provide a buffer between the individual and the abuser. While these practical measures do little to address the problem of online abuse and its underlying misogyny, employing such simple tactics does create a space in which women can continue to harness the benefits of working online, without having to continuously trawl through abusive invective. Making such skills an integral part of regular CPD sessions will allow police officers to ensure that their ability to successfully navigate the digital landscape remains current, and can also encompass any technical changes that online platforms may introduce.

At an organisational level, all interview participants emphasised the need for greater regulation of online platforms. Many felt that the proposal contained in the Online Safety Bill published in June 2021, that this regulatory function be managed by Ofcom (HM Government, 2021), offered a workable solution. The literature and interviews have both highlighted a need for better training for all public bodies, including policing, with employers to be reminded of their duty of care for staff, whatever their rank. This study confirms the need for the police service, along with other public sector employers, to become much more aware of the level and danger of online abuse faced by their organisation's staff, with particular emphasis to be placed on the unique vulnerability faced by women employees, due to the misogynistic underpinnings of online abuse.

Addressing the causes of misogynistic online abuse at a societal or structural level is significantly more complicated and requires action above and beyond that which is possible for the police service to undertake independently. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting the need for such structural intervention, particularly around the area of gender equality. As is obvious from the empirical evidence presented here, there is a clear requirement for change in the attitudes, behaviour and language used towards women police officers. The mechanisms for eliciting such change are complex and reach beyond the scope of this study. However, it seems apparent that the genesis for such activity must begin with changes in education, police culture and wider society, with an emphasis on making online abuse both legally prohibited and culturally unacceptable. This will require efforts from men as well as women, to identify, call out and report abusive behaviour, in the hope that this will create an environment where the abuse of the type recounted by the police officers involved in this study becomes socially prohibited. This will be a challenging and ongoing task and will require constant vigilance. But it is a necessary intervention if the recruitment and retainment of the highly skilled female workforce within the police service are to be maintained and enhanced.

Conclusion

This research article presents the results of a mixed methods study investigating the online abuse experienced by women police officers. The two research questions underpinning this study consider how women police officers are targeted online, and the effect that the online abuse that they receive has on their interactions with the digital world. By drawing upon a traditional thematic literature review, the results of a scoping review of interdisciplinary literature and seven in-depth empirical interviews undertaken with senior women police officers, it is possible to determine that officers of all ranks have encountered online abuse, and that this abuse is overwhelmingly gendered. Furthermore, it is possible to make a connection between the gendered abuse that women police officers receive online and the sexual harassment that occurs in the physical space.

Addressing the first research question resulted in the identification of seven elements of online abuse, building upon the work of Chemaly and Sussman (2020). These seven elements are defamation and libel, emotional harm, harassment, physical characteristics, belittling and undermining, silencing, and threat. These separate lenses provide an effective means of analysing the act of online abuse. By applying these lenses, it is possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of how women police officers are targeted online, as these dimensions are present, both in whole and in part, within all the online abuse that

women receive. The distribution of these different dimensions is not equal across the public sphere, with women receiving different types of abuse, depending upon their occupation. Politicians and journalists are more likely to receive online threats that are violent or sexualised, while police officers more likely to receive abuse that targets their age or appearance. The reasons for this are unclear, and worthy of further investigation. However, it is possible that those engaged in perpetuating online abuse are more wary of attracting legal sanction from police officers, who are more familiar with the criminal penalties available and will be more likely report offences and seek redress under these laws.

The second question in this study considered what effect online abuse has on the interactions of women police officers with the digital world, and this research has found that the effects of receiving online abuse on subsequent interaction with the digital space are rendered at an individual, organisational and structural level. For individual police officers, it is clear that receiving online abuse has the potential to cause a significant amount of emotional harm.

Ultimately, the effect of online abuse upon the individual may be their temporary or permanent withdrawal from digital interaction, as they choose to exit from the online space. Such action is taken as both an overt occupational choice and an emotional necessity. Whilst understandable, such a response could be classed as an act of silencing, which is frequently designated as an element of misogyny. Nevertheless, the women police officers interviewed for this research also emphasised that online interaction is rarely wholly negative. Despite the multifarious malign effects described in the first part of this article, there remain benefits to having and maintaining an online presence (Khan et al., 2014; Marwick and Hargittai, 2018). Three key benefits identified during the course of this research include the value of online interaction as a communication tool, the importance of having and maintaining a voice in the online space and the mutual support that is to be gained from other women police officers, particularly during or after episodes of online abuse. The research concludes by outlining a range of measures that could be taken at an individual, organisational, and institutional level to address the issue in an effective way.

Limitations of this research

As a qualitative research project, the findings of the study are not generalisable to the wider population of women police officers. The small sample size, an inevitable consequence of choosing to focus on ‘elite’ participants, exacerbates this issue (Gray and Jones, 2016). Furthermore, the reliance on snowball sampling, while an effective way of gaining access to the chosen population, will also negatively impact upon generalisability. Despite this obvious and acknowledged limitation, the relatively small total number of senior women police officers means that the sample size, as a proportion of the total population, is not as insignificant as may first appear.

Potential for further research

It would be interesting to conduct further interviews with women police officers across the junior ranks, to explore if occupational seniority affects the nature or level of online abuse received. It would also be valuable to investigate further the reasons for the

differentiation in the types of online abuse experienced by women in public facing occupations, to determine whether, as surmised, the fact that women police officers will have a greater knowledge of the law around online abuse, coupled with easy access to reporting mechanisms, acts as an insulator from the most violent excesses of the abuse that occurs online.

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