How has social media changed the way female politicians address their constituencies? Is social media empowering female political aspirants and politicians, disempowering them, or both? What are the most important steps that can be taken to ensure that traditional and social media serve to promote more inclusive and stronger democracies?

To find a response to these critical questions, I interviewed eighty-eight women leaders in politics, civil society, journalism, technology across 30 countries, reviewed over 100 publications, and worked with a data analytics company to identify gender trends in the 2020 Democratic Party Presidential primaries in the United States.

Over and over, what I heard is that social media is a double-edged sword for women in politics. On the one hand, it provides them important avenues for direct communication with the public to deliver an unfiltered narrative in media environments that are still overwhelmingly biased; on the other hand, it exposes them to shocking amounts of sexism, harassment and threats.

Often, attacks come from armies of politically motivated trolls and bots. Analysis of the 2020 primaries shows that female candidates are attacked more often than male candidates by fake news accounts, and my interviews with female politicians in Ukraine, Italy and India suggest that the same phenomenon is happening in those countries too, with the deliberate goal to preventing women from taking part in the democratic process.

Yet, despite evidence of the existence of gendered disinformation campaigns and endemic online violence against women, almost no resources are dedicated to understanding how this phenomenon affects our democracies and implementing the best practices and innovations that would contribute to addressing this issue. Why?

The ones who are in power, when they aren’t behind the problem, often disregard it. Social media companies are only beginning to grapple with the unwanted effects of their products and they are not held accountable by those which should serve as watchdogs and advocates, because many international nonprofits, academic institutions, and philanthropic investors working on the democracy and technology field fail to recognize the gravity of this problem.

Women’s equal participation is a prerequisite for strong, participatory democracies and as data becomes available on how social media can be mobilized effectively to bring women closer to government – or push them out, those who claim to care about the health of our democracies have fewer and fewer excuses for their inaction.

To read the full report, know more and learn what you can do to join this movement, go to: https://www.she-persisted.org/.

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I’m a senior expert, advocate and writer on women’s leadership and gender equality globally and have worked in various capacities for a wide range of international nonprofits (including Vital Voices, International IDEA, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, The Wilson Center) and UN agencies. I have written for The Hill, The Huffington Post, Ms Magazine, New America, and The Council of Foreign Relations among others and my research has been featured on Time Magazine, Politico and Voice of America, among others. She currently serves as Senior Director for Girls’ Education at Room to Read.