

WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Minutes



women and work
all party parliamentary group

Date	15 September 2025
Time	14:00 – 15:30
Venue	Jubilee Room and via Zoom
Chair	Baroness Karren Brady, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG
Speakers	<p>Catherine Fookes, MP for Monmouthshire and Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG</p> <p>Kim Leadbeater, MP for Spen Valley</p> <p>Christine Flack, Campaigner and Mother of Caroline Flack</p> <p>Leomie Anderson, Model, Television Presenter, and Activist</p> <p>Heather Smith, CEO of AXA Health</p>
Theme/ Background information	<p>This session explored the growing dangers faced by women in public-facing roles, particularly in politics, business, and the media. In a climate where misogyny is increasingly amplified, women are encountering a troubling rise in harassment, prejudice, and safety threats. These range from media hostility and workplace discrimination to online abuse and real-world intimidation, as seen during last summer's general election campaign.</p> <p>Women in the public eye face disproportionate scrutiny and aggression that undermines their participation and wellbeing. Whether through relentless media narratives, exclusionary workplace cultures, or hostile digital spaces, the cumulative impact can deter women from entering public roles or drive them out entirely. For those who remain, the toll is often psychological, professional, and personal.</p> <p>The panel examined how societal norms, media framing, and platform dynamics contribute to gendered abuse, and explore urgent solutions, from policy reform and platform accountability to workplace protections and support mechanisms, to safeguard women in work and public life.</p>

Baroness Karren Brady opened the session by welcoming attendees to what she described as a pressing and deeply concerning issue: the rising levels of violence and abuse facing women in public life, whether in politics, business, media, or sport. She reflected on how incidents of intimidation and harassment, such as those witnessed during the riots following the most recent general election, show that this is not an isolated problem but part of a wider and worsening trend. She emphasised that the discussion would focus not only on the

challenges but also on the urgent need to drive policy reform so that women can step into public roles and thrive. She added that this is not just a women's issue but one for society as a whole, as when women's voices are diminished everyone suffers.

Baroness Brady introduced fellow Co-Chair of the APPG, Catherine Fookes MP to say a few words. Catherine noted her background as the former CEO of the Women's Equality Network Wales. Catherine spoke about how she had long worked to encourage women to put themselves forward as leaders across public life, yet observed that nothing prepares women for the scale and nature of the abuse that comes with such roles. She shared her own recent experience of receiving threatening messages that forced her to change her phone number and stressed that such abuse is designed to silence women but cannot be allowed to succeed.

Kim Leadbeater MP then spoke, reflecting on how one of the most inspiring aspects of Parliament is its women, but also recalling the tragic murder of her sister Jo Cox, who dedicated her life to lifting others up. She described the toxic atmosphere of the 2021 by-election in which she was elected and her dismay at the rising levels of hatred across the country. She emphasised that abuse is not confined to politics, pointing out that staff in supermarkets, nurses, and other public-facing workers are increasingly targeted, and she noted that many women have stepped away from business and public life because of the hostility they face. She reflected on how she and Catherine regularly visit schools to encourage young people to consider careers in public service, but admitted that this is a difficult message to deliver given the reality of what such careers entail. She expressed concern about the global dominance of male leaders whose egos often exacerbate conflict, stressing instead the importance of the qualities of peace and civility that women bring to leadership. Despite the challenges, she urged attendees not to give in to despair or anger but to remain hopeful and proactive in addressing the problem.

Christine Flack spoke next, sharing a deeply moving account of the devastating impact of media intrusion and online abuse on her daughter Caroline Flack. She described how social media, while empowering in some ways, disproportionately targets women with abuse related to body image, private lives, and personal relationships. In Caroline's case, the relentless cruelty of both the press and social media caused immense harm, leading to the loss of her career, withdrawal from public life, and ultimately her death by suicide. Christine recalled how Caroline even used social media to research how to end her life and highlighted the shocking decision of one newspaper to publish an image of her daughter's blood following an incident of self-harm. Despite assurances that lessons would be learned, Christine stressed that little has changed, with trolling and false stories continuing to affect her family years later.

Heather Smith, CEO of AXA Health, reflected on her responsibility for the wellbeing of more than a million women and highlighted the increasing mental health pressures faced by women in sport and the workplace. She shared research carried out ahead of the Women's Euros which found that over half of female athletes surveyed had experienced sexist abuse, with many considering giving up. She emphasised the importance of calling out sexist behaviour and of creating environments that promote psychological safety, explaining that failure to do so leads to the death of ambition. Heather also noted that AXA has seen 30% more mental health claims from women than men and criticised the double standards in the media that portray women as either too ambitious or not ambitious enough.

Leomie Anderson introduced herself as a model and presenter who has been active on social media since her teenage years. She described how the online space has deteriorated over time and become a treacherous environment for women, especially young Black women, and raised concerns about the way incel groups on platforms like YouTube and Reddit encourage misogyny among young men. She shared her own experiences of racist and sexist abuse, stressing that she worries for younger women who do not have the same resilience and are

more vulnerable. She argued that social media platforms are failing to enforce the standards they claim to uphold and warned that the online world is becoming as dangerous as the physical one. She also spoke about the importance of supportive networks, particularly family, in helping women navigate these challenges.

The panel then discussed the responsibilities of both traditional media and social media platforms. Christine Flack questioned why the press has not been better regulated following the Leveson Inquiry and described how many conversations with editors end abruptly when accountability is raised. Heather Smith agreed that unfair reporting continues to target women leaders. Kim Leadbeater acknowledged that stronger regulation is needed but also noted the tension with freedom of speech. Christine countered that hate speech should not be confused with free speech, and Kim observed how comments that once might have been made privately in a pub are now broadcast to the world online, often in more extreme forms. Baroness Brady suggested that requiring users to provide verified details that could be disclosed when abuse occurs might help deter the worst behaviour, and Christine reminded the group that such requirements once existed in print journalism.

Discussion also focused on possible reforms, including recognising misogyny as a hate crime, redirecting fines levied against social media companies towards support services, and considering whether a levy on platforms could be introduced. Participants raised concerns about the lack of female leadership in the technology sector and the barriers women face in securing venture capital to start their own firms. Others suggested industry standards for moderation and stronger engagement with the Online Safety Act, though there was consensus that current progress is inadequate and that platforms are scaling back moderation rather than improving it.

The conversation turned to the importance of individual responsibility and support networks. Leomie Anderson stressed that women should not be forced out of online spaces and that it is vital to let young women know they are valued and supported. Zelda Perkins highlighted that democratic levers, while slow, can be effective, citing her own campaigning experience in reforming the use of NDAs. Other attendees noted that sexism and misogyny are not treated as seriously as other forms of hate and called for cultural as well as legislative change, including the need to challenge everyday microaggressions.

In closing reflections, Christine Flack urged for perseverance, saying that despite the times when progress feels impossible there are enough good people to make change happen. Heather Smith emphasised the importance of resilience and accountability in creating safe environments. Kim Leadbeater shared that although she had felt low on her way to the session, she was leaving feeling energised and committed to organising a major event on civility in 2026.

Baroness Brady concluded by thanking all the speakers and attendees for their honesty and courage, acknowledging that Parliament is not an easy place to share such personal stories. She encouraged everyone present to carry forward their reflections and maintain momentum beyond the room, warning that enthusiasm can too easily be lost in the demands of daily life.

Comments from Zoom Chat

Sonya Barlow, CEO of the Like Minded Females Network, introduced herself as the founder of an organisation supporting women to thrive in the workplace, which has upskilled 100,000 women across 24 countries. She reflected on her own experience as someone in the public eye and committed to sponsoring efforts to create safer, more inclusive spaces.

Yvonne Harrison, CEO of Women in Football, welcomed the discussion, stressing the importance of addressing discrimination in sport and noting that 89% of women in football have experienced discrimination at work. She shared that the Women in Football community now numbers almost 12,000 and provides members with free legal advice and safe spaces.

Several attendees thanked Christine Flack for her bravery in sharing her story, with comments from Sally Tsoukaris (CSPA), Charlotte Edgeworth, and Mandy St John Davey MBE acknowledging her strength. Dr Sally Penni MBE observed that cross-sector discussions are vital, noting that women in law face similar issues.

Professor Pauline Leonard of the University of Southampton noted that these issues are equally pressing in academia. Yvonne Harrison and others thanked Leomie Anderson for her testimony, highlighting the particular challenges faced by women of colour.

Attendees raised a number of points for consideration, including the need for industry standard guidelines and regulation (Sonya Barlow), the role of AI and human moderation in addressing online abuse, the lack of accountability from social media companies, and the urgency of updating legislation such as the Online Safety Act and Miscommunications Act (Dr Sally Penni). Rosie Hewat argued that the Online Safety Act functions more as a compliance tool than a genuine protection framework, stressing the need for victim-centred approaches, targeted laws on intimate image abuse and cyberstalking, and stronger cross-border enforcement. She suggested redirecting fines levied on platforms into survivor compensation funds and grassroots digital safety programmes.

Further comments stressed the importance of early education for young boys and girls, international cooperation on regulation, and greater verification of information online. Several participants, including Sonya Barlow and Sally Tsoukaris, observed that withdrawing from online spaces is not a solution and compared it to telling women not to walk in the streets.

The session concluded with attendees thanking the panel for their powerful contributions, with comments from Kate Prince of Essity, Noreen Burroughes MBE, Mandy St John Davey MBE, and others expressing appreciation and commitment to supporting efforts going forward.
