



New Zealand House of Representatives
Te Whare Māngai o Aotearoa

Petitions Committee

Komiti Whiriwhiri Take Petihana

54th Parliament

April 2026

Petition of Sam Fisher: Inquiry into threats and violence against women MPs and local authority reps

Presented to the House of Representatives
by Greg O'Connor, Chairperson

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Petition of Sam Fisher

Recommendation

The Petitions Committee has considered the petition of Sam Fisher—Inquiry into threats and violence against women MPs and local authority reps—and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Request for an inquiry into the abuse and intimidation of women representatives

This petition was signed by 102 people. It was presented to the House by Rachel Boyack on 11 September 2024, and requests:

That the House of Representatives conduct an inquiry on the abuse and intimidation of women representatives, in Parliament and local authorities.

Comments from the petitioner

The petitioner considers that New Zealand's political culture has become intimidating and aggressive, especially for women. He says that dehumanising behaviour and threats of violence are causing candidates to resign or not stand for politics, which negatively affects democracy.

Mr Fisher requests an inquiry into abuse directed at women representatives in Parliament and local authorities that covers:

- the number of threats and abusive comments received
- the scale of different types of comments (such as threats, racist comments, sexist comments) and comments and threats directed at families
- regional and demographic data about those sending abuse and threats.

The petitioner worked in ministerial offices in the early 2000s and told us that he saw abuse and threats that affected the work of female MPs. He asserts that the problem has grown since then. He believes the scale of this problem and action against it should be non-partisan, both due to the scale of the issue and the negative effect on democracy from women not seeking election to, or staying in, representative politics.

Comments from the Parliamentary Service

The Parliamentary Service operates a security team which is responsible for security on the parliamentary precinct. It offers specialist security advice, support, and training to members of Parliament, including home security assessments. It also works to detect, analyse, and provide information on current and potential threats to Parliament's people, offices, and buildings. This includes collaboration with the New Zealand Police and Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora on the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre New Zealand.

The Service told us that over recent years it has noticed an increase in threats and abuse directed towards MPs, both online and in the community, despite what it believes to be a high threshold before MPs will report abuse. It believes it is already well established that threats and abuse towards elected representatives, particularly those who are women, is a serious issue requiring attention.

The Service told us that its main limitations are resourcing and “underwhelming” engagement by MPs with its security offerings. It plans to continue expanding its offerings and hopes that members will be proactive in learning about and engaging in the services available to them.

Comments from researchers

Research into politicians’ experiences of harassment was conducted by Dr Justin Barry-Walsh, Professor Susanna Every-Palmer, Dr Rhiannon Watson, Dr Lucy Hammas, and Dr Oliver Hansby. Dr Barry-Walsh is also the clinical lead of the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC). They provided a written submission based on their research and experience with the FTAC.

In their written submission, the researchers told us they had conducted two surveys of New Zealand politicians’ experiences of harassment, in 2014 and 2022. They also conducted one qualitative study on women MPs’ personal experiences of harassment and threats. They found that the frequency and effects of harassment increased significantly between 2014 and 2022.

The researchers told us that, in their first survey, 87 percent of responding MPs reported harassment, and this rose to 98 percent in the second survey. MPs also reported a rise in harassment through social media, from 60 percent in 2014 to 96 percent in 2022.

There was a gendered effect, with women experiencing more gendered abuse, threats to family, and threats of sexual violence. The research showed that women were twice as likely as men to feel fearful and nine times more likely to feel unsafe in their own home. The researchers told us that the findings are consistent with international research.

Comments from our discussion

As well as receiving written submissions, we had a joint discussion with the petitioner, the Parliamentary Service, and Dr Justin Barry-Walsh.

A known issue

We agree with the submitters that abuse and threats against politicians is an issue both in New Zealand and globally. We also observed that, along with women, politicians from ethnic minorities in New Zealand also face increased abuse.

The Parliamentary Service said that the anonymous nature of digital platforms and online abuse make it a challenge to figure out the true size and source of the problem. It suspects that what it sees is just a fraction of the incidents that are occurring, and that the true extent of the problem is hidden by significant underreporting by both staff and members of Parliament. The Service told us that members appear to have a high tolerance, and that

many appear to view threatening and abusive communications and behaviour as an unavoidable consequence of being a member of Parliament.

Dr Barry-Walsh emphasised that research shows that harm from harassment of MPs is real and does not only occur from physical violence. Psychological distress, changes in behaviour, and changes to how a politician engages with their community are also well documented and should be taken seriously. He said that while women and ethnic minorities are targeted more often, all incidents against all politicians should be taken seriously and addressed.

Importance of reporting

Both the Parliamentary Service and Dr Barry-Walsh emphasised the importance of reporting abusive behaviour. The Service told us that it is not sufficiently resourced to proactively monitor members' social media, so it relies on reports made by members and staff, and information passed on by the Police. As noted above, the Service believes there is much more harassment towards MPs than what is reported. The Service said it would be better equipped to find solutions for members if it received more evidence of the problem. We also heard that reporting from staff and MPs needs to be timely. When harassment is reported as soon as possible, Parliamentary Security can more easily gather evidence and provide support.

We discussed our own experiences, with some members noting that reasons they have not reported incidents include becoming desensitised due to the frequency of incidents, not having time to do so due to tight schedules, and not knowing at what point an incident has reached the threshold where it should be reported.

Dr Barry-Walsh said that the FTAC has a focus on prevention and, like Parliamentary Security, would prefer early reporting. He told us that the threshold for reporting should be when an incident causes distress. However, he acknowledged that sometimes victims do not report incidents because they do not realise straight away how much they have been affected. He said that, along with feeling upset, changes in behaviour, including losing sleep, can be a sign that someone is affected by a situation.

Request for an inquiry

The petitioner said the reason he is petitioning for a parliamentary inquiry is that it is "impossible to address issues hidden in the dark". Mr Fisher told us he does not believe the New Zealand public understands "how bad it is".

The Parliamentary Service told us that, while it believes the problem's existence is already established, it will assist with any inquiry. It said it has now instructed security analysts to record gender data in relation to incidents.

In their submission, the researchers agreed that abuse aimed at female politicians is a real problem that requires attention. However, they are agnostic about whether the inquiry proposed by the petitioner is the best option.

Comments from Local Government New Zealand

Following our hearings, we requested a submission from Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) to provide more insight about the topic from the perspective of local government candidates and representatives. LGNZ's submission aligned with what we had heard about harassment of women parliamentarians. A mid-2025 survey of LGNZ members found that bullying and harassment was very common, reported by 91 percent of women and 83 percent of men surveyed. Women reported more harassment on social media and in everyday interactions outside formal settings. Survey results showed that most respondents take no formal action, which echoes the concerns of underreporting expressed by the Parliamentary Service.

LGNZ told us that there has been an increase in harassment of politicians. In a poll of mayors and chief executives taken at a 2024 event, 53 percent of respondents said aggressive, abusive, or offensive behaviour was worse than a year ago. LGNZ noted that in the time that has passed since the petitioner made his petition, politics has become more polarised. It told us that many experienced mayors and councillors have said that the 2025 local election campaign was the "most divisive and nasty" one they had participated in.

LGNZ considers that it would be difficult to gather hard data on whether abuse had a chilling effect on female candidates standing for the 2025 local elections, but it suspects that this is the case. Anecdotally, its female members have reported gendered abuse, sexualised comments, and threats, with wāhine Māori particularly targeted. It notes that much abuse is online and that this abuse is unavoidable when politicians need to use social media to campaign. In-person abuse has taken place at public events, in the supermarket, and at politicians' homes. Children have been present during instances of in-person abuse and some women reported that their children had been followed home from school. LGNZ told us that women elected members have said they have felt "in good conscience they must say 'No'" when asked whether they recommend standing for office, especially if the question is asked by a young woman with a family.

We were pleased to learn that LGNZ provides resources for elected members on how to stay safe, including both physical and online safety. We commend LGNZ for this work.

Other work being done in this area

We note that, in addition to the research undertaken by our submitters, other work is being done to investigate harassment and abuse of politicians. The Ministry for Women is preparing a long-term insights briefing called "Free to Lead: Tackling the effects of online harm on the pipeline of future women leaders". It published a draft report in March 2026.¹ We note that the draft report contains New Zealand-specific research on this topic, and look forward to seeing the final report. The Ministry for Women has also developed a *Free to lead* toolkit, available on its website.² The toolkit is designed to provide practical tools for women with a public profile and their employers.

¹ [Consultation on the Ministry for Women's 2026 Long-term Insights Briefing | Ministry for Women](#)

² [Free to lead toolkit | Ministry for Women](#)

Our response to the petition

We agree with the submitter and experts that abuse and harassment towards politicians is a real issue, and that female and non-binary politicians are subjected to increased and gendered harassment. As politicians, many of us have experienced harassment online. For some of us, this has included gendered and racial comments. Some of us have also experienced threatening behaviour in person directed towards us and our family members.

We note that when a long-term insights briefing is presented to the House, it is referred to a select committee to consider and report on. Consideration of the Ministry for Women's long-term insights briefing will provide a chance for parliamentarians to consider many of the issues raised by the petitioner. We consider that opening a separate inquiry is not necessary at this stage, but we thank the petitioner for the chance to discuss this issue, and thank the petitioner and submitters for their expertise.

We intend to send a copy of this petition report to the Governance and Administration Committee. We hope that the evidence we have gathered on this petition will be useful to the committee as it carries out its work.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was signed by 102 people on the Parliament website. It was presented to the House by Rachel Boyack on 11 September 2024 and referred to us on the same date. We met between 19 September 2024 and 30 April 2026 to consider it. We received written submissions from the petitioner, Local Government New Zealand, the Parliamentary Service, and a joint submission from Dr Justin Barry-Walsh, Professor Susanna Every-Palmer, Dr Rhiannon Watson, Dr Lucy Hammans, and Dr Oliver Hansby. We heard oral evidence from the petitioner, the Parliamentary Service, and Dr Justin Barry-Walsh.

Committee members

Greg O'Connor (Chairperson)
Carl Bates (until 29 January 2025)
Kahurangi Carter (from 29 January 2025 to 11 February 2026)
Greg Fleming
Paulo Garcia (from 29 January 2025)
Francisco Hernandez (until 29 January 2025)
Celia Wade-Brown (from 11 February 2026)

Hon Jan Tinetti also participated in some of our work on this petition.

Related resources

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available on [the Parliament website](#).

A recording of our hearing can be accessed online on the [Parliament website](#).