

## Chapter 10

# “Feminism is Eating Itself”: Women’s Experiences and Perceptions of Lateral Violence Online

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### Abstract

While a growing body of literature reveals the prevalence of men’s harassment and abuse of women online, scant research has been conducted into women’s attacks on each other in digital networked environments. This chapter responds to this research gap by analyzing data obtained from qualitative interviews with Australian women who have received at times extremely savage cyberhate they know or strongly suspect was sent by other women. Drawing on scholarly literature on historical intra-feminism schisms – specifically what have been dubbed the “mommy wars” and the “sex wars” – this chapter argues that the conceptual lenses of internalized misogyny and lateral violence are useful in their framing of internecine conflict within marginalized groups as diagnostic of broader, systemic oppression rather than being solely the fault of individual actors. These lenses, however, require multiple caveats and have many limitations. In conclusion, I canvas the possibility that the pressure women may feel to present a united front in the interests of feminist politics could itself be considered an outcome of patriarchal oppression (even if performing solidarity is politically expedient and/or essential). As such, there might come a time when openly renouncing discourses of sisterhood and feeling free to disagree with, and even dislike, other women might be considered markers of liberation.

*Keywords:* Cyberhate; misogyny; lateral violence; internalized misogyny; internalized oppression; feminism

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## Introduction

As I was writing this chapter, a senior feminist colleague of mine was weathering a vicious attack on Twitter. A prestigious Australian university had invited her to give a talk on a polarizing, feminism- and gender-related topic, and in the days leading up to the event erroneous assumptions were being made about its content, accompanied by a storm of *ad hominem* bile. My colleague was called “clueless,” was said to have had “zero training,” and was accused of endorsing “eugenics” and “lobotomy.” People said she hadn’t “published shit” and needed to learn to “shut the fuck up” and to be “deplatformed.”<sup>1</sup> Someone else posted a comment saying, “There is no way I could listen to this person’s presentation without slapping them.” My colleague was devastated. As a feminist scholar researching the ethics and unexpected consequences of emerging technology, she is familiar with the problem of misogyny online. What threw her on this occasion, however, was that most of her antagonists were women. Some were even senior academic colleagues who apparently had no qualms about attaching their real names, identities, and even institutional affiliations to their attempts to impugn her character and derail her presentation.

In recent years, a growing body of scholarly literature has revealed the ways in which large numbers of men around the world are making use of the affordances of media communications technology to abuse, threaten, harass, and stalk girls and women online (Citron, 2014; Jane, 2017; UN Broadband Commission, 2015). In contrast, very little research has been conducted on women’s perpetration of these sorts of attacks against each other.<sup>2</sup> This chapter takes a small step toward addressing this lacuna. With the possible exception of intimate partner cyberstalking (IPCS)<sup>3</sup> and some dimensions of cyberbullying among youth populations,<sup>4</sup> woman-on-woman cyber violence is rare compared to that perpetrated by men against women.<sup>5</sup> When women *do* turn on each other online, however, they can be just as violent and threatening as men. As this chapter demonstrates, their attacks can include graphic slut-shaming and credible rape and death threats, as well as abuse, harassment, and stalking with offline as well as online dimensions.

How and why are women attacking each other online? Do these attacks differ from those involving male perpetrators? And is this phenomenon best understood within the prism of patriarchal oppression or are women among their own worst enemies? These are the problematics to which this chapter responds.

To address these research questions, in the first section I begin by explaining the methods, limitations, and definitions used in the larger study underpinning this chapter. In the second and third sections, I provide examples of the two most common themes of female-perpetrated abuse reported by the women in my interview cohort. These involved attacks about birth and motherhood, and attacks relating to sex and self-sexualization. In explicating these two genres of cyberhate, I show that each resonates with an historical, intra-feminist schism, namely, what have been dubbed the “mommy wars” and the “sex wars.” Given that a large number of interviewees raised internalized oppression and lateral violence – concepts frequently deployed to explain peer-to-peer aggression in marginalized groups – as explanations for their experiences, the fourth section of the chapter is devoted to their take on these conceptual lenses. In the final section, I undertake my own appraisal of

internalized misogyny and lateral violence. In a nutshell, my case is that these framings are helpful in their contextualization of individual instances of woman-on-woman cyberhate as involving “gendered constructions of self and internalized gender ideologies” (Homan, 2019, p. 494) that are diagnostic and constitutive of systemically discriminatory gender regimes. The framings do, however, have limitations and require caveats, particularly with regard to the need to recognize other factors, such as individuals’ psychological states, as well as those heavily corporatized dimensions of online architectures which greatly amplify “outragification” and polarization. In conclusion, I reflect on the particularly painful sting women report feeling when they are attacked by other women, noting the stark challenges lateral cyber violence poses to feminism given that some of the most vicious assaults are perpetrated by attackers who claim to be acting in feminism’s name. I argue that the pressure on, or necessity for, ideologically disparate women to get along with each other for the sake of feminism could itself be considered an outcome of oppression.

## **Definitions, Method, and Limitations**

In this chapter, the general terms “gendered cyberhate” and “cyber violence against women and girls” (“cyber VAWG”) are used to refer to a range of phenomena occurring at the gender-technology-violence nexus. These include sexually-graphic invective, rape, and death threats, image-based abuse (aka “revenge porn”), and impersonation. Following definitions furnished by bodies such as the United Nations (UN), my use of the term “violence” refers to “dehumanizing, aggressive, and harmful acts that are in turn physical, psychological, sexual, and exploitative” (UN Broadband Commission, 2015, p. 5). I use the term “target” rather than “victim” or “survivor” to avoid connotations of either helplessness or “forced heroism” (Sehgal, 2016). This chapter refers only to “female” and “male” actors, terms which I acknowledge exclude people who identify as other genders. This is because the broader research project on which this chapter draws on was restricted to interviewees who identified as female, and none of those interviewees reported being targeted by transgender or nonbinary antagonists.

Data for this chapter were drawn from the qualitative interview component of a large and ongoing research project concerned with mapping and studying the history, manifestations, nature, prevalence, causes, and impact of gendered cyberhate and misogyny online.<sup>6</sup> Interviews were conducted with 52 participants who were aged between 19 and 52,<sup>7</sup> and who were given the option of using their real names or pseudonyms.<sup>8</sup> Of these participants, six identified as belonging to the LGBTQI+ community (including one transgender woman), four identified as members of Australia’s First Nations people, two identified as having Asian backgrounds, and two identified as Muslim.<sup>9</sup> For various reasons, many of the 14 women referred to in the previous sentence asked that these parts of their identities not be included or foregrounded in research outputs associated with the project, and I have respected this request in this chapter. While interviewees were not asked outright if they identified as feminists, 40 independently volunteered the fact that they were feminists during their interviews.

While the initial aim of this research was to examine misogynistic abuse and harassment perpetrated by men against women, the remit of the project was expanded after the first interviewee said she believed that a portion of the hateful and harassing material she had received had been sent by women. Queries about female-perpetrated attacks were subsequently added to the list of questions asked of all interviewees. A total of 36 out of the 52 interviewees said one or more of their attackers was female. Three members of this subgroup reported being attacked only or mostly by other women (in contrast to the other 33 women in this subgroup who said that, while they had been attacked by women, this occurred far less frequently than attacks by men).

Given that the anonymity and pseudonymity afforded by online environments can make it difficult, if not impossible, to be certain about people's offline identities and genders, the 11 case studies given particular attention in this chapter<sup>10</sup> refer only to scenarios in which interviewees were very confident their antagonists were women. This confidence was usually because perpetrators were already known personally to targets; inadvertently or deliberately disclosed some aspect of their real identities; and/or subsequently made themselves known to targets in offline contexts. For example, the colleague mentioned in the Introduction found herself face-to-face with her online attackers when they arrived in person as part of deplatforming protests against her talk. Ultimately, the relative ease with which gender can be obscured, ambiguous, or deliberately misrepresented online makes it impossible to identify the gender of perpetrators with Cartesian certainty. That said, my case is that this should not stand in the way of analyzing online violence from gendered perspectives. The fact that online actors are often anonymous and hard to identify and track down has historically been used as an excuse for various types of inaction (including the prosecution of scholarly research) in relation to gendered cyberhate (Jane, 2017, pp. 76–111). On my account, therefore, the risk of misgendering a perpetrator is the lesser evil to ignoring the various gendered dimensions of cyberhate altogether.

This study had a number of limitations. First, the data are drawn from qualitative research and are therefore unable to offer a reliable indication of prevalence. Second, while steps were taken to include women from a range of demographics, the recruitment techniques were not designed to obtain a representative population sample. Third, while this chapter is informed by international research findings, at the qualitative level, its focus is anglophone. Despite these limitations, however, the case studies furnished are extremely valuable in that they offer some of the first, rich descriptions of women's experiences and perceptions of lateral violence in digital environments.

## **Mothers Who Want Their Babies to Die**

One of the two most dominant themes of hateful, female-perpetrated material directed at women in my interview cohort involved vitriol over issues relating to motherhood, such as home birth, breastfeeding, vaccination, discipline, and performing paid work after having children. These attacks comport with what has

been referred to as the “mommy wars,” a conflict which began in the late 1980s and initially focused on tension between working and stay-at-home mothers. Thanks to the advent of social media and the rise of what have been dubbed “mommy blogs,” however, there now exists “animus between myriad parenting philosophies and choices” in which mothers are pitted against each other in a zero-sum battle where some mothers are winners and others are losers (Abetz & Moore, 2018, p. 275).

While some fathers have been observed weighing in on some parenting-related disputes online (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017), within my interview cohort, vicious attacks relating to motherhood were one of the few genres of cyberhate perpetrated by women that had distinct differences to that perpetrated by men. While members of various online men’s rights groups often sent cyberhate impugning women’s parenting, this was usually part of blanket criticisms of a perceived feminist agenda with regard to access to children after parental separation. Women’s attacks on each other, in contrast, tended to focus on highly specific birth and parenting issues, in concert with venomous dismissals of women’s physical appearances (the latter being a general feature of most cyberhate regardless of the gender of perpetrator or the putative reason for the attack).

Of the three interviewees who reported being attacked only or mostly by other women, two were castigated for what was perceived as bad mothering. Sally,<sup>11</sup> for instance, had received a large volume of extremely vitriolic cyberhate – all of which was sent by women, and most of which evinced an ideology of combative motherhood. At the time we spoke, the 32-year-old doula and blogger whose writing prompted an onslaught by female detractors who called Sally mentally ill, an irresponsible mother, and “unlady-like” because, as one woman put it in response to a photograph Sally had posted of herself breastfeeding, “ladies don’t expose their tits for the world to see.” Sally said much of the abuse seemed to involve a “toxic competition,” in which women who chose to give birth in hospital were framed as “good” moms who wanted “their babies to live,” whereas women who home-birthing like her were “bad” mothers who wanted “their babies to die.” She also recalled that:

There were a lot of comments about... just how revolting my body is... that it was fat, that my breasts were really large and floppy, that my areolas are huge, that I have lots of pubic hair and... should really get a Brazilian before I have a birth if I’m going to share birth photos.... One [woman said], “thanks for reminding me I need to wax before my next OB appointment.”

While Sally was vilified for, among other things, breastfeeding too much (she and a friend “cross-nursed” each other’s children) and for too long (she was still nursing her children when they were two years old), another interviewee, Jacinta Tynan, was attacked by women online because she was perceived as not breastfeeding enough. Like Sally, most of Jacinta’s online attackers were female. These women (wrongly) accused the 45-year-old television reporter and news anchor of “chuck[ing]” her baby on to bottled formula milk so she could return to work,

and condemned her for being a bad mother because her television appearances suggested she had time to go to the hairdresser, which, as Jacinta pointed out in her interview, was simply part of her work requirements.

While women frequently criticized Jacinta for looking too attractive, they also vilified her for not looking attractive enough at a time when her face and body had changed due to a pregnancy Jacinta had not made public, claiming the mere sight of her induced nausea. Jacinta – who went into labor with her first child while onscreen reading the news – was also subjected to a “blast of online bullying,” most of it by women, after writing an opinion piece about finding motherhood more enjoyable and easier than she had anticipated. On this occasion, she received about 2,000 hateful comments “absolutely tearing shreds off” her. Some commentators wished illness on her son and infertility on her. Others accused her of “setting the cause back” for women with postnatal depression, a charge Jacinta found particularly hurtful because she had experienced depression herself.

In this example, a public declaration about enjoying motherhood is framed by other women as taboo because it is seen as erasing or underplaying the experiences of those struggling as mothers. A similar zero-sum framing – but one relating to remarks about finding motherhood *difficult* – is evident in the experiences of the 26-year-old Australian blogger Annie Nolan, who became the target of a mob “pile on” after posting a photograph of her two-year-old twins with what were intended to be funny statements written on the back of two large envelopes. These statements took the form of a series of answers to questions strangers frequently asked Annie about her twins, including “conceived by f\*\*\*ing,” “born via c-section,” and “yes, my hands are full (sometimes with two glasses of wine just to get through).” After uploading the photo to her blog’s public Facebook page, the post went viral and was viewed more than two million times over two days. As a result, Annie was inundated with abuse and death threats, including messages from women sending photographs of their dead children and the urns of their cremated babies, alongside accusations that she was a terrible mother and was ungrateful that her children were alive.

A similarly vicious attack was launched at Catherine Hughes, a 28-year-old businesswoman who became a vaccination advocate after her four-week-old son, Riley, died of pneumonia as a result of contracting whooping cough. In the 24 hours after his death, Catherine and her husband created a Facebook page to honor the memory of their son, to encourage vaccination, and to field intense media interest in the story. The page was shared widely and provoked a tsunami of hateful messages from “anti-vaxxers” – including many women – who sent messages such as: “fuck you,” “go grieve in private,” “you’ll have the blood of other babies on your hands,” “Riley was a hoax,” “this didn’t happen,” “you’re being paid by Big Pharma,” “vaccines don’t work,” “it was god’s will,” “survival of the fittest,” and “if you’d tried... alternative therapy, your child would still be alive.”

In addition to the cruel and extremely caustic nature of the comments directed at targets, the case studies furnished in this section illustrate a stark lose/lose dynamic, in that mothers were attacked and bullied by other women online regardless of the nature of their birth- and parenting-related choices and experiences, and regardless of whether they were perceived as either subscribing to or

subverting stereotypical norms around feminine appearance. As I will demonstrate in the next section, similar patterns were evident in woman-on-woman cyberhate with thematic content relating to sex.

## **Ugly Sluts and “Attention Whores”**

The second, dominant theme of female-perpetrated abuse experienced by women in my interview cohort concerned issues relating to sex and self-sexualization practices. Messages were frequently couched in the rhetoric of “slut-shaming” – that is, the embarrassment, insult, or denigration of girls and women “for their real or extrapolated sexual behavior, including for dressing in sexual ways, having sexual feelings and/or exploring and exhibiting them” (Chemaly, 2012, para 2). While this was sometimes linked to the fact that targets worked or were perceived as working in the sex industry, targets were also called variations of “you’re a fat, ugly, slut” by women who had taken exception to targets’ writing, profession, music, clothing, domestic violence activism, views on Middle Eastern politics, skin color, religion, and so on. Like abuse about women’s appearances, the deployment of slut-shaming as an all-purpose admonition had much in common with male-perpetrated cyberhate against women, as did the more general lack of discernible links between the propositional content of hateful messages and those aspects of targets perpetrators ostensibly found objectionable.

A key difference in slut-shaming perpetrated by women compared to that perpetrated by men lay in the fact that women often simultaneously berated targets for failing to engage in enough or the right sort of feminism. Exhortations to feminism, combined with sex-related bullying, resonate with some of the nastier in-fighting around what have been dubbed the “feminist sex wars.” These date back to divisions within feminism – originating in the late 1960s – with regard to how women should “best undo patriarchal definitions of women’s ‘proper’ sexual expression,” and originally manifested in debates around sexual orientation and sexual practices (Showden, 2016, p. 1). New, intra-feminist tensions around sex have since emerged in response to factors such as the availability of pornography online, the so-called “pornification” of culture, and the frequency with which female internet users engage in self-sexualization practices on platforms such as Instagram. Bitter intra-feminist fighting also continues about whether, for instance, sex work, pornography, and BDSM<sup>12</sup> sex practices are best understood as violence against women or a “sex-positive” feminist practice (Showden, 2016, p. 1), as well as around transgender-related issues. Kate Toone (2018), for instance, argues that trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) and sex worker-exclusionary radical feminist (SWERF) separatist politics have resulted in “extreme whorephobia, erasure, and lateral violence” against queer sex workers like herself (p. 110).

Zahra Stardust, 32, a (recently graduated) PhD student who had had a long career in many sectors of the sex industry, including striptease, pole dancing, burlesque, brothel work, mistressing, and pornography, had received “consistent harassment” online from both men and women. Men tended to display a toxic

sense of entitlement to sexual encounters, while women antagonists usually expressed anti-pornography hostility. For instance, a media article describing Zahra as a “feminist stripper” prompted Facebook comments from women such as “Feminist strip tease, give me a fucking break – it’s an oxymoron,” and “feminism is about developing high order ability so that one doesn’t have to rely on materialism or sexuality to survive.” Zahra spoke of her immense fatigue at feeling a feminist obligation to constantly respond to ugly and unkind messages from other women who demonstrated “no ethic of care” for sex workers.

While Zahra had a large number of female antagonists attacking her online, Christa Hughes received severe abuse and harassment from just one woman. The 44-year-old feminist singer, circus performer, and comedian was attacked, harassed, and stalked online and offline by a woman who used five different pseudonyms, sometimes claiming she was a representative of the “Australian Women’s Movement.” Repeatedly calling Christa names such as “slag” and “cunt,” this woman accused Christa of being “pro-rape” and of performing songs that caused women to be raped. She then threatened that Christa herself would be raped as punishment. A typical example of the multiple messages this woman sent over a period of years read:

It’s me again, you little fucking cocksucker. When we get hold of you, you little fucking prick teaser, we’re going to fuck you senseless. We’re going to tie you to a fucking tree and fuck you front and back. Then we’re going to fuck your sisters and maybe your mum.... We know where you fucking live.... You’re gone, baby, we’ll get you. I’m going to stick my carrot<sup>13</sup> so [far] up your fucking little yuppie cunt, it’ll probably fucking kill you.... When you fucking least expect it, we’ll be there... we fucking swear we fucking mean it.

The woman also hacked Christa’s email and impersonated her in order to send abusive messages to various musical artists, recording companies, music writers, and media outlets, as well as delivering notes to other residents of Christa’s apartment block warning that Christa was a thief, liar, and cheat. When Christa reported the woman to authorities, police said they could not act “until something happens,” raising the possibility that this woman’s criminal actions were regarded as not being particularly serious and as not posing a credible threat because she was female.

Accusations of being a “bad feminist” were also directed at Elinor Lloyd-Philipps, a 28-year-old office worker who ran a website where she blogged about and sold retro and vintage undergarments, with a focus on body pride and plus-sized garments. Of the dozens of abusive and harassing messages she received daily, Elinor said about 20% came from women who claimed she was “slutting around” with their husbands, “damaging people’s bodies by forcing them to wear old-fashioned underwear,” promoting “torture devices... invented by men,” and/or “pressuring plus-sized or obese women to change their bodies.” Women also frequently wrote to Elinor chastising her about the “flaws” in her



body, saying she looked like someone's grandmother and should put her "disgusting... arse away."

Similar messages were sent to Jackie McMillan, a live performer and the public face of a Sydney fetish club she co-founded in 1993. At the time of our interview, Jackie, 41, was also doing media work for an organization advocating for the rights of sex workers and was receiving a great deal of abuse from other women, most of whom she identified as belonging to morally conservative organizations and/or "anti-sex-work" feminist factions. Yet, rather than engaging predominantly with Jackie's opinions and politics, most women focused hatefully on her body size and aesthetics:

I had a really aggressive young woman come and tell me I was a fat, ugly, slut because she believes in free speech.... Lots of people call you an idiot or say that you have no idea. Then it goes to fat insults if you don't back down. And I don't usually back down.

One woman who identified herself a political conservative sent Jackie a number of "aggressive" and "violent" messages calling her a "fat cow" and "sauerkraut" before suggesting Jackie would end up like Amanda Todd – the 15-year-old Canadian student who took her own life after being bullied online. Jackie took this as a veiled threat and said she found the comment "haunting."

Female-perpetrated cyberhate with sex-related themes often accused targets of having secured a job or having achieved some other form of professional success because they had engaged in sexual favors with men in power. On other occasions, targets were attacked because they were perceived as being intimately involved with perpetrators' friends or former romantic partners. Sarah Connor, 32, an award-winning hip-hop artist and lawyer, developed anxiety issues, including shortness of breath and feeling sick and light-headed before live music performances, after being attacked by other women associated with the music industry (alongside other antagonists). One woman contacted a person she thought Sarah was romantically involved with, saying:

I've heard you're involved with Sarah. You do know she's like the biggest slut in the hip-hop scene? You really should be careful getting involved with her because I thought you were smarter than that and you'll just end up with a bad reputation as well.

Beth,<sup>14</sup> a 37-year-old therapist working in a freelance capacity as a photographer, identified sexual competitiveness as a theme in much of the hateful material she had received from other women. While Beth was expected to dress in – and post selfies of herself wearing – club-wear when she photographed nightclub events, these invariably provoked a large volume of cyberhate from women, many of whom Beth had encountered socially or while working, who sent messages such as "Why the fuck would you post this picture? Doesn't your boyfriend give you enough attention? ... Are you an attention whore or something?"

During our interview, Beth invoked the “crab syndrome” – a metaphor used as an analogy for the dysfunctional lateral violence that can occur among members of oppressed communities (Lateroute, 2007) – to explain why she thought women were attacking her so violently online:

[We’re like] crabs... all being held by patriarchy at the bottom of the bucket. As soon as one crab is successful and gets to the top of the bucket, the other crabs are trying to pull it back down again because they don’t like the idea that one’s getting to the top.

As I will explain in the next section, a lateral violence framing was volunteered by multiple interviewees as part of their explanatory narratives for the female-perpetrated cyberhate they had experienced, and, for the most part, offers a useful lens for making sense of the phenomenon under discussion.

## **Internalized Misogyny and Lateral Violence**

Lateral violence – also known as “horizontal violence” – refers to peer-on-peer violence in marginalized groups such as Indigenous cultures (Gooda, 2011; Korff, 2019) and LGBTQI+ communities (Kelly, 2017; Toone, 2018; Vivienne, 2017), as well as more generally among women (Daly, 1978; Moane, 2000; Trott, 2017). As a conceptual framing, it recognizes that subjugated peoples may lash out with displaced fury and frustration after internalizing and embodying dominant discourses and ideologies about their own groups, even and especially if these work against the interests of individual subjects as well as against the interests of the larger groups to which they belong. These may take the form of the damaging slurs and falsehoods constantly directed at them by their oppressors (Bailey, 2019, p. 5); discourses and ideologies relating to, for instance, gender hierarchy and subordination; and/or ideology-driven norms that seem commonsensical or “natural” – such as “good mothers stay at home with their babies” or “good girls don’t enjoy sex.”

When internalized oppression manifests, it may take the form of physical violence, as well as malicious gossiping, shaming and undermining, backstabbing, social exclusion, scapegoating, bullying, and organizational conflict (Gooda, 2011; Korff, 2019). Rather than confronting the system that oppresses them, subjugated peoples may direct their dissatisfaction inward toward themselves and/or outward toward their peers – or toward those even less powerful than themselves (Korff, 2019). A vicious cycle can develop in that, if violence or other forms of conflict and antisocial behavior emerge, the oppressor may then label and stereotype the oppressed “for the responses that they have been set up to make,” which then becomes “a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Lateroute, 2007, p. 289). This chimes with the phenomenon known as “stereotype threat,” which recognizes that strong, negative, societal views may not only be internalized by targets but may actually affect their behavior (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 314).

Of my interviewees who had been attacked by other women online, almost all volunteered some take on internalized misogyny and/or lateral violence as an explanation for this aggression. Jacinta, for instance, saw women's attacks on her as stemming from a comprehensive and systemic lack of support for mothers, suggesting that the consequent stress, isolation, and hardship resulted in attacks on other women perceived as having better circumstances. Caitlin Roper, an interviewee who was a member of the morally-conservative Australian women's group Collective Shout, nominated internalized misogyny as the reason the abuse she received from women was so similar to the abuse she received from men. Jackie – at the opposite end of the political spectrum to Caitlin – raised similar concerns:

I've seen feminism really demonized.... The... movement is in crisis but I think that's [because there's] so much pressure from outside. [Feminism] is... eating itself in places.... It's that misogyny that we've taken on board as women.

Sally's take on the issues was equally blunt:

It comes from... trying to survive patriarchy. You've got to cut down that bitch so that you're not cut down.... Patriarchy sets women up against each other.... It's really hard to be a woman and I think it's getting harder and... we're competing even more.

## Discussion

On my account, the use of internalized misogyny and lateral violence as conceptual lenses for unpacking women's attacks on each other online is useful for understanding internecine conflict within marginalized groups as diagnostic of broader, systemic oppression, rather than focusing solely or predominantly on individual interactions in the hunt for explanations and blameworthy actors. In the context of cyberhate, these lenses also help explain some key similarities and differences between the attacks perpetrated by men against women and those perpetuated by women against each other, while also showing that both these types of cyberhate are gendered in a way that keeps women socially and politically subjugated.

For instance, internalized misogyny and lateral violence might explain why sex-related cyberhate perpetuated by women had so many striking similarities with that generated by men with regard to content, idiomatic usage, and context (or, in relation to slut- and appearance-shaming, *lack* of context). Given that shaming and blaming women for DNA-level deficiency is the lingua franca of patriarchy, it is revealing, but unfortunately not surprising, that women are calling each other "fat," "ugly," "slutty," and "stupid" online using almost identical locutions as those deployed by men. It seems feasible that these lines of attack are chosen because antagonists have been conditioned to accept the "logic" of judging women against these overlapping yet contradictory sets of "key performance indicators," and are aware of the power of these words to wound – quite possibly because they have previously been wounded by them personally.

With regards to abuse with thematic content relating to birth and parenting, it is surely no coincidence that these hostilities focus on the domestic sphere which – despite many decades of feminist activism – is still widely regarded as a woman’s natural domain. Research in 2014, for instance, revealed that 58% of 18-year-old high school seniors in the United States thought the best kind of family was one in which the man was the outside “achiever” and the woman took care of the home (a rise of 16% from two decades earlier when only 42% of high school seniors held this belief) (Anderson, 2017, para 3). It is possible, therefore, that bitter wars wage over these issues because many women still regard the home as one of the few spheres of life that is their domain, a place they may achieve a degree of power and prestige, and where their knowledge is valued in a way it might not be valued elsewhere.

So long as we are conditioned to believe or accept that the most significant things about ourselves are our choices and circumstances with regard to birth and parenting, the impulse to fiercely defend our own approaches and to attack others whose parenting practices differ from our own is likely to remain powerful. Such dynamics are eminently understandable. Yet, continuing to expend so much time and emotional labor arguing about individual parenting without questioning the larger, embedded assumption that parenting is primarily or exclusively women’s business may well detract from or even stymie big picture feminist activism. It also risks further reifying gendered ideologies. As Sally puts it: “Where are the dads competing over [this] shit?”

Despite the usefulness of the lenses of internalized misogyny and lateral violence, however, my conclusions are that they do require some caveats when applied to sex and gender. Given that lateral violence framings are most commonly used to analyze contexts involving Indigenous peoples (see e.g., Freeman & Lee, 2007; Gooda, 2011; Korff, 2019; Lateroute, 2007), care must be taken to avoid conflating issues relating to gender and race. Similarly, the term “lateral” should be deployed with caution to avoid problematically flattening or homogenizing individual women’s contexts, as well as the intersectional oppression suffered by, for example, women who are also of color, queer, differently-abled, and/or Muslim, and so on.

Diagnoses of internalized misogyny and lateral violence also risk eliding part or all of subjects’ agency and responsibility for their actions. In the context of feminism, these framings could be taken to infer, at best, an absence or dearth of self-reflection and/or self-determination (because women are incarnating pernicious stereotypes that are oppressive both to themselves as individuals and to women overall) or, at worst, a type of brainwashing (in which women are being manipulated as hapless victims). It is also potentially politically disingenuous because it conveniently permits the *a priori* dismissal of other people’s dissenting positions as merely the products of manipulation or delusion. Indeed, accusing other women of speaking and acting out of internalized misogyny might *itself* be a form of lateral violence. It is revealing, for instance, that some of my morally conservative feminist interviewees were strident in their claims that sex-positive feminists were suffering from internalized misogyny, and vice versa.

Another concern is that focusing solely on issues relating to gender oppression and feminist politics risks missing those aspects of cyberhate better understood as

being produced by the architectures of the internet. For instance, [Tristan Harris and Aza Raskin \(2020\)](#) argue that online hate speech should not be considered a mirror that reflects the sorts of things people have always said behind closed doors. Instead, they argue that contemporary social problems such as cyberhate are the result of “dark infrastructure” (rather than “dark patterns” or bad actors), that have been generated by business models that do not just facilitate but *rely* on the amplification of outrage and polarization ([Harris & Raskin, 2020](#)). Also cogent here is [Kerry Carrington’s \(2013\)](#) observation that rises in young women’s offline violence in Western nations – much of which appears to be directed at friends or peers – correlate with a rise in social online networking that normalizes, rewards, and incites girls’ fights (pp. 65 & 67). For instance, there have been steep rises in the number of online searches for videos of girls physically fighting with other girls, with these rates vastly exceeding comparable searches for boys fighting boys ([Carrington, 2013](#), p. 69).

The central focus of this chapter has explicated woman-on-woman attacks online in terms of overarching structural forces in forms such as patriarchy, neoliberalism, social fragmentation, capitalism, and heteronormativity. It is important, however, to acknowledge the intersection of these structural forces with perpetrators’ individual traits, in terms of, for example, insecurity, jealousy, competitiveness, personal and/or professional rivalry, narcissism, mental illness, thrill-seeking, boredom, cruelty, and/or a desire for “bragging rights” ([Carrington, 2013](#), p. 70).<sup>15</sup> With regard to work in psychology, for instance, we might consider the role played by what is known as the “Dark Tetrad”; that is, the personality traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism. In their research into IPCS, for instance, [Melissa Smoker and Evita March \(2017\)](#) found that women were significantly more likely than men to engage in IPCS, and that all Dark Tetrad traits were significant predictors of this behavior (p. 393).

To reflect the role commercialized infrastructure plays in relation to digital ills such as hate speech online, [Harris and Raskin \(2020\)](#) use the slogan: “It’s not the people. It’s the pipes.” With regard to this chapter’s discussion of woman-on-woman cyberhate, we might amend this to “it’s not *just* the people but also the pipes and the patriarchy” to better capture the complex interplay of individual psychologies, mob dynamics, corporatized technological architectures and business models, *and* systemic gender inequity that facilitate and amplify all forms of contemporary gendered cyberhate, including women-perpetrated forms.

## Conclusion: Et Tu Brutè?

As I was proofreading and fact-checking the final version of this chapter before submission, I contacted the feminist colleague mentioned in the introduction to reconfirm her willingness to share an anonymized version of her cyberhate experience and to double check whether “devastated” was too strong a word to characterize her feelings about being attacked by other women on Twitter. Her reply was that, if anything, this word was not strong enough:

I had what I think would be described as two nervous breakdowns in the 12 hours leading up to the talk, and I couldn't sleep the night prior because of the extreme abuse. What is that expression from *A Clockwork Orange*? Ultraviolence? That's what it felt like to me.

Finding oneself at the epicenter of a mob attack online is invariably a harrowing experience. Yet, as my colleague discovered, it can be especially wounding to discover our assailants are those we had assumed were peers, friends, or allies. Many of the women interviewed for this chapter concurred, saying that when their online aggressors were women, the hurt, fear, anger, self-doubt, and sense of vulnerability they usually experienced during cyberhate onslaughts perpetrated by men were compounded by feelings of despair, disbelief, and betrayal, as well as a sense of pessimism about the threat these types of brutal, internecine conflicts posed to the broader feminist project. Some interviewees were even changing, reducing, or ceasing their feminist commentary and activism online. Sally, for instance, said that five years after starting her blogs, she was giving up writing in an attempt to escape "the comment wars." She made this decision after receiving – on her birthday – a message from a woman who wrote, "I hope that your daughter dies so she doesn't have to grow up with a mum like you." Sally said she felt like she had been hit in the stomach by a baseball bat. She wondered why another woman hated her "so much that she didn't want me dead, she wanted my child dead."

While lateral cyber violence is extremely concerning in light of its capacity to harm individual women as well as the feminist movement more broadly, in this chapter I have deliberately chosen not to attempt to propose potential solutions to the problems under discussion with a simplistic appeal that we all just settle our differences and get along. As the history of the feminist movement shows all too acutely, pleas for unity and/or attempts to paper over deep, intra-feminist fault lines with the rhetoric of solidarity and sisterhood have not proved helpful or realistic.

Further, the pressure women might feel to present a united front or even to *like* one another, could itself be considered an outcome of patriarchal oppression. Under patriarchy, we are categorized and oppressed purely on the basis of this one trait, even though individually our differences are tremendous and intractable, incorporating but also extending well beyond those diversities, oppositions, and asymmetries that fall under the umbrella of intersectionalism. Feminism has a long history of schisms and internecine disputes, most obviously in relation to debates between generations (for example, between second- and third-wave feminists), and around intersectionalism (in terms of the ongoing – and well-founded – critique that the dominant feminisms are White, privileged, and Western). At the same time, given the stark injustices caused by systemic gender inequity at the global level, there is a great deal at stake and urgent incentive to take action. Much recent scholarship on the upsurge of rage in Western feminism (see e.g., [Banet-Weiser, 2018](#); [Chemaly, 2018](#); [Traister, 2018](#)), for example, urges intersectional collectivist action.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, involvement in a collective feminist effort means we are likely to experience intense pressure to align ourselves with and work alongside folk we might otherwise find personally unlikeable or even ideologically abhorrent. My

contention is that the ideal/expectation/imperative that all women could and should be comrades – or at least to publicly perform comradeship – is *itself* unfair and oppressive. From a feminist perspective, presenting as a harmonious coalition is certainly politically pragmatic and possibly even politically essential. Yet calls for, or prescriptions of, sisterhood may have the unintended effect of contributing to essentialist framings of women as identic and fungible. They may also cause additional layers of suffering in that, in addition to the personal unpleasantness of experiencing conflict with another woman, women who find themselves involved in such conflict may feel they are letting the larger feminist team down.

It is an understatement to say that this is a complex problem with no easy solutions. Women’s savage attacks on each other – both online and elsewhere – present a new front of what has long been a painful and politically fraught dilemma for feminism. This is especially true given the prevalence of what could be categorized as a form of feminist or pseudo-feminist policing around who should be permitted to do and say what in the name of feminism, and the arguably unfair (if politically expedient) expectation that women settle or conceal their differences in the interests of the movement. My hope, however, is that the case studies furnished and issues raised in this chapter will at least help lay the foundations for future research into, and candid conversations about, the pressing need for feminism to find novel ways to accommodate the radical diversity of its members in order to muster enough social and political solidarity necessary to effect structural change.

## Notes

1. “Deplatforming” refers to attempts to stop a political opponent from having access to virtual and online venues to communicate their viewpoints.
2. As discussed below, most research in this area has focused on women’s attacks on each other’s birth choices and parenting practices via “mommy blogs” (see e.g., [Abetz & Moore, 2018](#); [Akass, 2012](#); [Lehto, 2019](#); [Steiner & Bronstein, 2017](#)). While parenting-related disputes are an important subsector of woman-on-woman attacks online, they offer only a limited view of a much larger problem.
3. While research on cyberstalking is limited and has resulted in inconclusive findings on gender distribution vis-à-vis perpetrators ([Ahlgrim & Terrance, 2018](#), p. 5), [Melissa Smoker and Evita March’s \(2017\)](#) study of cyberstalking against former and current intimate partners suggests it is women and not men who are more likely to engage in these behaviors, possibly in an effort to attain intimacy (p. 393).
4. While some studies suggest girls are more likely than boys to be both the perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying in youth populations ([Carrington, 2013](#), p. 69), more recent meta-analyses of cross-national data indicate a preponderance of male perpetrators in instances of both traditional and online bullying ([Smith, López-Castro, Robinson, & Görzige, 2019](#), p. 38). That said, a decrease in the male:female ratio has been observed in mid-adolescence, possibly related to online bullying ([Smith et al., 2019](#), p. 33).

5. According to the [United Nations Broadband Commission \(2015\)](#), 73% of women and girls have encountered some form of online violence, with women being 27 times more likely to be abused online than men and 61% of online harassers being male (p. 2 & 15). [Powell, Henry, and Flynn \(2018\)](#) have also shown that the majority of perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse are male, particularly if the victim is female (p. 309). Research into cyberbullying among youth populations, meanwhile, suggests that on average girls are “significantly and appreciably” more likely to be online victims, than boys ([Smith et al., 2019](#), p. 37). After many years of digital ethnography in trolling subcultures, [Whitney Phillips \(2015\)](#) also maintains that the vast majority of trolls are likely to be relatively privileged White males (p. 42).
6. The two main selection criteria for participation in the interview component of this project were self-identification as female; and first-hand experience of technology-facilitated hate, abuse, and/or harassment. Subjects were recruited via a range of techniques and interviews were conducted in 2015 through 2017. Interviews were conducted in person and/or via Skype, and NVivo software was used to code interview transcripts using approaches from grounded theory. The study was approved by the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee and funded through an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DE150100670).
7. This chapter refers to the age of subjects at the time they were interviewed.
8. This was at the request of participants and was ultimately approved by the UNSW Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. I have indicated throughout this chapter when pseudonyms have been used.
9. Please note that not all interviewees wished to answer questions about their sexual orientation and cultural backgrounds.
10. While only 11 case studies are directly cited in this chapter, my analysis and findings are informed by all the interviews conducted, as well as by the larger research project of which these interviewees were a part.
11. Sally is a pseudonym.
12. “BDSM” refers to sex practices incorporating bondage and discipline, and/or sadism and masochism.
13. This referred to one of Christa’s original songs called “Carrot Day.”
14. “Beth” is a pseudonym.
15. As I have argued previously, a type of “recreational nastiness” has become a key form of entertainment and mode of engagement online ([Jane, 2017](#), p. 22).
16. [Banet-Weiser \(2018\)](#), for instance, argues that contemporary, internetized “popular rage” is not sufficient and must be transfigured into “a powerful rage, an intersectional, collective rage, directed at a racist and sexist structure” (p. 185).

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