

‘Nobody has said it to my face’ - Helen McEntee hits back at sexism on her return from maternity leave

In a wide-ranging interview - a month after her return to office - the Minister for Justice talks about parental guilt, the stint by Cabinet colleague Simon Harris in her job and her future ambitions



Helen McEntee, Minister for Justice, labels some of the commentary around her maternity leave as 'insulting' and 'ridiculous'. Photograph: Nick Bradshaw



Jennifer Bray Political Correspondent

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When Minister for Justice Helen McEntee arrived back to her office exactly a month ago, she returned to two very unusual schools of thought about her second maternity leave.

One of them, muttered privately in political circles, was that she had engineered a “political masterstroke” by being away from the many raging fires in the Department of Justice. The other was that she had spent so much time away that she was effectively no longer a viable candidate for the leadership of her party, Fine Gael, when the time comes.

In an in-depth interview with The Irish Times, McEntee does not hold back. She labels some of the commentary around her maternity leave as “insulting” and “ridiculous”.

“If you are in a department for five years, you don’t avoid fires. There are always issues and there are always things you have to deal with. The idea that you take maternity leave to avoid doing your work: it’s insulting,” she says. “We live in 2023... it’s pretty ridiculous and I think women looking at that as well are appalled reading that.”

On the claim she has lost her footing in a future leadership race, she is equally as forthright.

“It is the same as the comments about me having babies and how that impacts on my work. I don’t think it has any bearing on what I do in my career or on what I decide to do or might decide not to do. I don’t really see that as being something that’s going to impede anything that I want to do,” she says.

There was another startling comment in a magazine that McEntee “has babies” while her Cabinet colleague, Simon Harris, the Minister for Higher Education who stood in for her during her maternity leave, “gets things done”.

McEntee learned of this comment only in recent days. Her attitude is: say it to my face.



'Nobody has been brave enough to put their name to it. And nobody has said it to my face' - Minister for Justice Helen McEntee on the sexist comments about her having been on maternity leave. Photograph: Nick Bradshaw

“What I note about comments I have seen is that nobody’s brave enough to put their name to it. It reflects more on the people who say them. As I said, nobody – nobody – has been brave enough to put their name to it. And nobody has said it to my face. So that says more about them,” she says.

Comparisons between McEntee and Harris have taken up plenty of column inches. The Minister for Higher Education told *The Irish Times* last month that he gave it his all during his stint in justice, but there was no concern for McEntee about being outshone by her colleague.

“Simon did a great job in fairness, and he took on an extra department, the same way Heather Humphreys did the last time. That is not an easy thing to do. He obviously continued a huge amount of work that I had started. I have a justice plan, so there are clear timelines, but he also put his own stamp on it and he focused on issues that he wanted to focus on,” she says.

“It’s easy to compare and say one person has done this or the other. But, again, it’s not something that I pass any notice on and I certainly wasn’t sitting at home going: what’s he doing? What’s going on here? It just wasn’t happening.”

Harris has not been shy about his ambitions in terms of maybe one day leading Fine Gael, and to a certain extent neither has McEntee.

“I have never ruled anything out. I have always said I am ambitious. It is not a way to avoid a question when I say that I am focused on what I’m doing. Anyone who knows me and my work knows that I give it 120 per cent,” she says.

But she adds: “There is no vacancy. The narrative that there is a split – one of us pitting against the other and this constant comparing. Actually we work really well together as a team. I think Leo is a fantastic leader. I really do. And I think that he should be leading us into the next election and beyond.”

McEntee is candid about returning to work after giving birth to her second son, Vincent, who is now six months old.

In terms of the justice portfolio, she offers a staunch defence of the hate crime and speech Bill, sets out Ireland’s strategy on a recently agreed EU migration plan and weighs in on a matter being widely avoided by most Ministers: the potential reform of Ireland’s abortion law.

Asked about how her last month has been since returning from maternity leave, she admits she was “nearly dreading it” but says it did not take long to settle back in.



'I am not doing too bad making sure that I get home in time for bedtime during the week and that I am not gone at the crack of dawn every morning. It is a fine balancing act' - Helen McEntee on juggling work and family life.
Photograph: Nick Bradshaw

“I had promised myself before I came back that I would try to maybe balance things a little bit better, work and home life. I am not doing too bad making sure that I get home in time for bedtime during the week and that I am not gone at the crack of dawn every morning. It is a fine balancing act... it is going okay so far,” she says.

“The older I get, and obviously with the fact that I have two kids now, I have kind of come to realise it is not straightforward. It is not easy, and you do have to juggle, and sometimes you have to compromise and sometimes you end up having more work on your plate than you’d like.”

One word that crops up is “guilt” – something that afflicts many parents returning to work.

“If there is a day or two where I have not seen them too often, I will come home and I will think: oh my God, they have changed,” she says.

“Or with Vincent, who is only six months old, [I will think] he looks different. And I am thinking: how long is it since I’ve seen him? It might only be a day or two but I mean, they are changing that quickly. You think, has it been a week? How has he changed so quickly? And you do get that kind of guilt... that I should be there all the time. But in another sense I love my job and I love doing what I am doing.”

The idea you would say to someone: go back and think about that again – quite frankly, I don't agree with it

– Helen McEntee on the abortion three-day wait

McEntee has come under fire in recent weeks over the proposed hate crime law, which she hopes to have enacted by the end of the year. Concerns have been raised by some politicians about the potential for the legislation to have a “chilling effect” on freedom of speech and at the lack of a definition for hatred in the proposed law.

There appears to be significant pushback from the public too, which she cannot ignore. Some Senators have argued that the process is being rushed, which McEntee rejects.

“Our commitment in the Programme for Government was to do it in the first year. We are now three years in so I am certainly not rushing it,” she says.

“There are actual protections in this Bill that allow people to say something that another person might not agree with or might find offensive. There is a very clear delineation between someone stating a fact or having an opinion to then crossing a line and encouraging other people to go out and hate that person or the group of people, or to be violent against them.”

She says it comes down to “what do the gardaí think? Is there enough evidence? What does the DPP think? Should it go to court? In a court what do a jury of your peers think? Did this person actually mean to cause hatred against another group of people?”

Another issue to have emerged in the debate is around the definition of hate, with some people calling for this to be more explicitly defined.

McEntee says she has strong advice from the Attorney General not to define hate explicitly, but she concedes that she is open to providing further clarifications as the Bill progresses.

“Hate is a well-known, understood concept. We are only halfway through a process and, as is the case, with any legislation, I am open to engaging with colleagues, I have said this from the very outset,” she says.

Another issue which has been high on the political agenda, but which many Ministers outside the Green Party have been reluctant to comment on, are the detailed changes to the State’s abortion law recommended by barrister Marie O’Shea in her report. McEntee says she backs the removal of the three-day wait to access medication, making her the first Fine Gael Cabinet member to do so. She also supports the decriminalisation of medical practitioners.

“I am pretty straightforward on that. I don’t believe there should be a three-day wait. I think if a woman has made a decision to actually go to a doctor or go to a hospital, it is not the first time they have thought about it,” she says.

“The idea you would say to someone: go back and think about that again – quite frankly, I don’t agree with it. I think it is difficult enough for a person to walk into that scenario and personally I would be in favour of that recommendation,” she says.

On migration, McEntee welcomes a “crucial” agreement to overhaul the EU migration system struck between member states at the start of June.

Under the new agreement, all EU countries must help the frontline border states that see the most migrant arrivals to cope, but they can choose how to do so, either by financial contributions, sending personnel or accepting some asylum seekers themselves.

While McEntee has not yet made a recommendation to Government on whether or not to opt in to the measures, she indicates that Ireland will align itself with the plans in more ways than not.

“The anticipation and plan would be that we align in as far as possible and that we will, at certain stages, opt in,” she says.

When she was promoted to Minister for Justice, McEntee placed reforming Ireland’s domestic violence policies at the top of her list of priorities. However, recently published figures appear to show that progress is slow. Earlier this month, the Irish Daily Mail reported that only nine new refuge places had been created in the past 18 months.

McEntee says that while progress may appear slow from the outside, work continues, including making 50 new “safe houses” available by the end of the year, and a new statutory body to oversee services set up by the new year. She also pledged to discuss with the Department of Public Expenditure delays of up to six months in the State lab in processing samples for toxicology reports, an issue which is in turn leading to delays in inquests and heartache for families. McEntee also indicated that the Sale of Alcohol Bill, which will detail longer opening hours for nightclubs and standardised hours for bars, will not be passed until 2024.

This week, controversially, she secured a High Court order forcing mobile phone service providers to retain the data of phone users for 12 months for the purpose of “safeguarding the security of the State”. The application followed the successful legal challenge by convicted murderer Graham Dwyer to legislation under which mobile phone data was retained and used in the prosecution of the 2012 murder of childcare worker Elaine O’Hara.

For McEntee, it has certainly been a busy month since her return to office. As she concludes the interview, she grabs a stack of reading papers from her adviser and prepares to race off for her next meeting.

Before she goes, she recalls a Women in Business meeting she spoke at in Trim at the age of 26, when she wasn't married and didn't have kids.

She told the room: "We can do everything. We should be able to do everything. There's nothing that can stop us."

Afterwards a woman approached her and gently suggested that it is quite hard to juggle it all.

"And now, myself, 10 years later, I'm like yeah, I know exactly what she meant," she says.

Helen McEntee - a decade in politics

Raised on the family farm in Castletown, Co Meath, Helen McEntee has been steeped in politics from a young age. She won a Dáil seat in the 2013 byelection following the death of her father, Shane McEntee.

She became interested in politics during her schooldays in Meath and went on to complete a degree in economics, politics and law at Dublin City University. After finishing college in 2007, she went to work for a subsidiary of Citibank, but the job was not for her. She then went on to finish a master's in journalism and media communications.

In the summer of 2010, she began to work in Leinster House with her father, who was then an Opposition TD and later moved with him to work in the Department of Agriculture after the 2011 election, when he was appointed minister of State for food and horticulture.

The sudden death of her father had a profound impact on her; she resolved to continue his work, winning that seat in the 2013 Meath East byelection. She secured 9,356 votes, or 38.5 per cent of the vote in the first count. Her first big promotion came after her re-election in 2016 when former taoiseach Enda Kenny named her minister of State for mental health and older people. After Leo Varadkar took the reins of Fine Gael in the summer of 2017, McEntee was appointed as minister of State for European affairs. She remained by his side throughout the early days of Brexit and grew in confidence. It was, to those close to Varadkar, no surprise then that she was appointed by him as Minister for Justice in 2020.

THE IRISH TIMES

Politics

Politicians to get 'security allowance' for CCTV and alarms amid concern over threats

Talks taking place on enhanced support after mounting intimidation, particularly towards women TDs



Politicians are growing increasingly concerned for their safety following instances of public frustration that have manifested as sinister behaviour. File Photograph: Bryan O'Brien/The Irish Times

Jennifer Bray

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The Coalition is examining changes to politicians' allowances to give TDs access to funding for security costs, potentially including new CCTV and alarm systems.

It comes amid growing concern within the Government about an increasing level of threats and abuse, particularly towards women TDs. Five female TDs told The Irish Times on Saturday of their experiences of sexually explicit letters, death threats and being followed to their homes.

A senior Coalition source said there was an increasing awareness within Government surrounding the issue and that talks between the Department of Public Expenditure and the Oireachtas are ongoing to address the matter.

Reviewing options

Minister for Public Expenditure Paschal Donohoe is understood to be examining two options: widening existing allowances so that politicians can claim for costs relating to their security, or else potentially creating a new allowance.

While it is expected that the security costs can be met from within existing budgets, Ministers are understood to be open to providing extra funding if necessary.

The allowances which could be widened include the Public Representation Allowance (PRA) or the Constituency Office Establishment Allowance (COEA).

Politicians who set up an office in their constituency can reclaim some of the costs associated with establishing that office under the COEA. This is a once-off allowance up to a maximum of €8,000.

The PRA covers the costs associated with being a TD such as office rental, leaflet printing and web hosting. Categories of expense allowable under this could be widened to include security costs, such as CCTV or alarm systems.

Under the current system, TDs are entitled to claim a maximum of €20,350 under the PRA. Cabinet members and Ministers of State can claim a maximum of €16,000. Senators can claim a yearly maximum of €12,225. The existing categories under which they can claim include rent, bills, equipment, stationary, insurance, web hosting, leaflets and advertising.

A source said the amount of money under consideration is “very small” and that it is unlikely there will be any budgetary impact. “The question is the structure, and how.”

It is understood that the talks between the Government and Oireachtas will conclude within several weeks. While there may need to be changes to existing legislation to alter the existing allowances, those alterations could potentially be made by statutory order alone.

‘Quick progress’

Mr Donohoe said that “discussions are ongoing with the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission regarding what can be done ... I am committed to making quick progress around changes in allowances that may be needed to achieve this.

“The tone and tenor of public debate, and the atmosphere around politicians, has changed again ... the anger of some has grown again. Being conscious of this and mindful of the language we use is really important at this time.”

Meanwhile, Minister for Social Protection has said social media companies should require users to disclose their real identities as part of an effort to clamp down on online abuse.

She told Newstalk's On The Record programme: "I believe we shouldn't have to accept comments from people [when] we don't know who they are.

"Some of them don't even have names, they're anonymous people and I think that there should be a requirement if you're going to put online media or put online comments in that domain, you should be accountable for what you say."

All five of the women Oireachtas members interviewed by The Irish Times had been forced to make reports to gardaí at some point. One female TD described a string of intimidating behaviour including a bullet shell left at the back door, a long lens over the garden wall, and receiving a letter that says: "you have a nice little body" with an extremely detailed description of the sexual acts the author wanted to perform.

Some of those interviewed have installed CCTV at their homes, extra locks on their front door, even extra locks on their bedroom doors.

Politics

Former Garda chief Nóirín O'Sullivan to lead taskforce on politicians' safety

Group established after female representatives revealed scale of abuse received in course of their work



Former Garda commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan will chair the 17-person taskforce. Photograph: Alan Betson

Jennifer Bray

Fri May 26 2023 - 13:48

Former Garda Commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan is to chair a taskforce established to address the safety of politicians in Ireland.

The taskforce was set up earlier this year after reporting in The Irish Times revealed the scale of the abuse female politicians face in the course of their work, both in person and online. Some said they faced death threats and sexual harassment regularly, others reported being followed and some said they had people turning up at their homes.

Female public representatives spoke of having to put extra locks on their homes and offices, and some said they no longer hold constituency clinics on the advice of gardaí.

The 17-person taskforce is to report back by December 31st with recommendations on how to address the problem of abuse and harassment in political life. It met informally on Thursday evening, and will hold a first official meeting on June 12th.

After the final report is sent to Government, Ceann Comhairle Seán Ó Feargháil will move to set up an implementation group to ensure the recommendations are followed. “It won’t be a case of a report and no action, there will absolutely be follow up action,” he said on Friday.

The membership includes the Women for Election chief executive Caitríona Gleeson, Independent TD Cathal Berry, Fianna Fáil Senator Fiona O’Loughlin, Senator Frances Black, Labour leader Ivana Bacik, Fianna Gael Minister of State Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, Fianna Fáil TD Jennifer Murnane O’Connor, Fianna Fáil Senator Lisa Chambers and Sinn Féin TD Sorca Clarke among others.

According to the terms of reference, the taskforce will consider the nature, prevalence and impact of abuse, including online abuse, on men and women who participate in political life within the Irish context. They will examine what public policies, including legislation, is needed to safeguard and support those who work in politics.

They will also look at the response of social media platforms in addressing online abuse and harassment. The Houses of the Oireachtas Service will provide administrative, legal and research services to the taskforce.

The Cabinet earlier this month approved allowances for improved security, which will allow politicians claim 50 per cent of the cost of intruder alarms, CCTV, fixed panic buttons, and personal monitoring devices. Oireachtas members will be able to apply for a vouched reimbursement of 50 per cent of their approved security costs, up to a maximum of €5,000, whichever is the less.

THE IRISH TIMES

Politics

‘Any woman in her right mind would not go into politics. You are completely dehumanised’

Five public representatives describe a world of threats, insults and fear, driving one to conclude: ‘I’ve gone past the stage of recommending politics to people’



Image: Irish Times Studio



Jennifer Bray

Sat Jan 14 2023 - 05:00

A bullet shell left at the back door. A long lens over the garden wall. A letter that says: “you have a nice little body,” with an extremely detailed description of the sexual acts the author wants to perform. A letter that says: “I have a picture of you stuck on my bedroom wall” which is defiled. A voice note sent on WhatsApp that says: “I’m going to piss on you.” Pictures of body parts: male, female, animals. Online messages that say: “you are a bitch, a tramp, a whore.” A nine-year campaign of online abuse.

Shockingly, some of the above is what one female TD describes as “the usual”.

Earlier this month Joseph Baldwin, from Gort in Galway, threw two bags of cow faeces at Fianna Fáil Minister of State Anne Rabbitte and Fine Gael TD Ciaran Cannon at a public meeting. The incident shone a light on an issue that some politicians are reluctant to talk about, namely their own safety. This reluctance is most pronounced among female TDs and Senators. The reason for this is that, by and large, they are on the receiving end of the vilest and most distressing abuse and threats.

Five prominent women politicians, well known to the public on air and in the Dáil and Seanad, spoke to The Irish Times about the full extent of what they are dealing with. Each gave compelling reasons for not being able to speak out on the record. All of them have been forced to make reports to gardaí at some point. Some have installed CCTV at their homes, extra locks on their front door, even extra locks on their bedroom doors.

*The man had been hanging around the neighbourhood, watching her in her home.
She got messages saying she looked 'even better in real life'*

Some have completely stopped holding constituency clinics on the advice of gardaí. Others have put in place a “buddy system” so they are never alone at meetings that could get heated. Two of the politicians said they had been followed. What no one has figured out yet, is how to address the problem.

Getting worse

“One reason I don’t talk about this publicly is because it just leads to more abuse. The other reason is this: we really want to encourage more women to go into politics, but no one will want to if they hear how bad it is,” says one female TD.

She says she is speaking about it now because it is getting worse, and she is worried about where it will lead.

“It could be anything from vile letters, letters about having a picture of me stuck to their wall covered in semen, voice notes, messages on Instagram, random stuff saying, ‘I’m going to kill you.’ For so long, I did not think it was having any effect.”



Fianna Fáil Minister of State Anne Rabbitte recently had a bag of cow faeces thrown over her at a public meeting. Gareth Chaney/Collins Photos

That was until someone turned up at her front door.

“It put the fear of God into me.” The man had been hanging around the neighbourhood, watching her in her home. She got messages saying she looked “even better in real life”.

She went from feeling safe in her home to installing multiple new locks, CCTV and heavy blinds. Gardaí told her she should not carry out constituency clinics unless she had some “supervision”.

Like other female politicians, she praises the work of the gardaí, but much of the abuse she receives could be considered as being outside their remit or not technically warranting intervention from An Garda Síochána.

After several incidents, which she says left her “shaken to my core”, she stopped going on TV in fear of her safety.

“It felt like the more [media] I did, the more I was drawing it on myself or something. I’m still not back to how I used to be. It knocked me back. That is the worst thing about it. I should be doing my job.”

For her the main solution is this: “We need to get more women into politics. The more women there are, the less targeted we will be.”

One issue she highlights is how easy it is for people to find her address. She argues that this should not be the case and that politicians should not, whether on the council or in the Oireachtas, have to disclose their exact address.

She also says that, ahead of the next general election in two years, authorities in Leinster House, and in political parties too, need to look at providing a briefing to new TDs to make them aware of what they can do to ensure their own safety.

‘Completely dehumanised’

In another political party, a prominent female TD gives this blunt assessment when asked if she would now advise other women to go into politics.

“Absolutely not. Any woman in her right mind would not go into politics. You are completely dehumanised.”

She says of the level of abuse: “It is ferocious. You don’t say anything about it, because if you do, there is really, honestly, nowhere to get support from. It can be perceived as a weakness in terms of not being able to deal with it.”

She tried to get into her car outside of the office and he prevented her from doing so.

A man who was walking past them saw what was happening and intervened, giving her an opportunity to flee

“It varies from pornographic stuff that you delete and don’t react to, to threats and physical stuff where you fear for your physical safety. It has got worse.”

Recently she went to gardaí after an incident in her constituency office. She told the constituent that, after reviewing his files, he needed legal representation as he had exhausted all of the channels that she would have recommended.

She was effectively telling him she had done all that she could do for him.

“Then he absolutely turned. He started screaming and roaring and coming up into my face.” She tried to get into her car outside of the office and he prevented her from doing so. A man who was walking past them saw what was happening and intervened, giving her an opportunity to flee.

“I was completely shaken. I spoke to the gardaí about it and they were excellent.”

She says, however: “I cannot be running to the Gardaí every time.” What is the solution? “We have to stop dehumanising politicians. We are all human beings, doing the best we can.”

She says party leaders also have an important role in making sure that, where members raise safety concerns, these are fully addressed. “They really need to take it seriously. There have been many times where it has not been taken seriously.”

‘Spat at’

The incident with the cow faeces garnered a lot of attention, but similar situations happen more regularly than people are aware of.

“I have had red sauce, eggs and other objects thrown at one of my constituency offices, my staff have been shouted at, spat at, called all kinds of names, [they have had] hate speech uttered in their presence, they have dealt with drunks entering my office abusing them, people high on drugs who get very aggressive. I have had to introduce a buddy system in the offices and reduce my hours of access,” another female politician says.

She says has had “pictures of body parts – men’s, women’s and animals – sent to me which I was not privy to but badly impacted my parliamentary assistant, who moderates my social media.”

“I have been called bitch, tramp, whore, and eejit online and in person, I have had my photo superimposed on to images of witches, people getting sick, scantily clad bodies.”

“I have had people impersonate me knocking on doors and abuse people, shouting at them and proudly declaring to be me.”

The issue of safety beyond the Dáil, such as at constituency offices, is now a live one. TDs say they have been informed that the Oireachtas is considering a new allowance to beef up security for politicians’ local offices, not only for their sake but for the sake of their staff who work there every day. Some politicians are also privately calling for a dedicated officer within An Garda Síochána with whom they can liaise, who would be a point of contact in the event of any threats.

Flood of comments

Green Party TD Neasa Hourigan was asked on Newstalk recently what kind of abuse she was forced to deal with.

“I’ve been spat on, I’ve had coins thrown at me, I’ve had my house and car and children photographed and some of it put on social media with abuse.”



Neasa Hourigan recently spoke on radio about the regular abuse she had to deal with. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill

She added: “I’ve gone past the stage of recommending politics to people.” After she spoke out, there was a predictable flood of comments in some areas on Twitter, with one video comparing her to Princess Fiona from Shrek and other users calling her a “bitch”, and an “idiot.” Other female politicians looked at this and felt vindicated in their decision, until now, not to speak out about their experiences.

While female members of the Oireachtas are subjected to more sexualised and gendered abuse, male politicians are feeling it too.

Fine Gael TD Neale Richmond has blocked thousands of people online. He has received messages from people threatening to knock his teeth out if they see him in the street.



Fine Gael TD Neale Richmond TD believes that not allowing anonymous posting on Twitter would cut the abuse he receives in half. Photograph: Liam McBurney/PA

“The one thing that really gets me is when my sister sees these things, or my mother-in-law. They get really upset. Friends who mean well will send you on what they’ve seen. But it all builds up after a while, and it does upset you. I don’t need to see that, to see people bringing my kids into it, saying I hope they are proud of you.”

He says that anonymity on Twitter needs to be removed. By his calculation, it would take 50 per cent of the most harmful content away overnight. He also says that the reasons for reporting a message online are too “black and white”. “Also, the people who cheerlead this sort of stuff need to think long and hard about what they are doing. There are lots of people online with big followings who see themselves as a talking heads who need to reflect on what they are doing.”

Compliment her body

Younger female TDs who happen to be single appear to be among the most vulnerable. Two women in the Dáil who are not in relationships have said that once it became known locally that they were unattached, the intensity of messages and letters increased dramatically. One said she pretended, for a while, that she was with someone because men were deterred by that. Another described the kinds of messages she might receive. Men would compliment her body or appearance and demand a response.

She references a local man who she would always have been friendly with when she had a partner. When it became known that her relationship with her partner ended, the same man “turned”. He would send her extreme messages and she now goes out of her way to avoid him.

“If women were acting like that, we would be accused of being crazy,” she says. Sometimes men will message her propositioning her, and when she does not respond they become angry and lash out at her. She has received messages from these men, who she says are almost always older men, telling her that they will remember it in future, or at the next election.

When it comes to being targeted online or in person, the problem does not just lie with sexually graphic images or letters, or outright abuse or threats. It can be more insidious. One woman says she has endured a nine-year campaign of abuse at the hands of a man who has made it his business to make up falsehoods about her personal life.

Over a period of years, this man would cast aspersions on her ability to do her job. He would comment on her clothes and her appearance. The claims became more and more ludicrous. He said that during Covid-19, she was out drinking and spreading the virus and he put up factually incorrect posts about her relationships.

“He says whatever he wants about me. He wrote that I was down the courts with my ex-partner, which never happened.”

‘I know people say you need a thick skin for politics but it is the wrong attitude. I’ll be honest, I could have nearly given up [politics] but the stubborn part of me can’t let them win’

She said there were comments about how she had the “brain for being a mother or maybe a social worker, that I looked confused and was out of my depth. It started to really upset me.” Eventually, she had to go to counselling. “He was relentless.” She complained to Facebook on numerous occasions but said she was left with the impression that “they genuinely did not care”.

In one email sent by Facebook to the TD, seen by The Irish Times, a representative for Facebook wrote: “We have looked at the content in great detail and, unfortunately, it does not violate any of our community standards.”

‘Different standard’

They said that “when it comes to public figures, a different standard applies”. “In short, we allow more robust discussion and debate around public figures and matters of public interest. We have an obligation to allow a broad range of views to surface, and to facilitate free debate. This often takes the form of opinion or commentary about individuals who are in the public sphere.”

She went to a solicitor but was told that the man, in turn, would just represent himself, talk for hours and drag it out while her legal bills mounted. Regardless, she spent €1,200 trying to put a stop to his posts.

“I know people say you need a thick skin for politics but it is the wrong attitude. I’ll be honest, I could have nearly given up [politics] but the stubborn part of me can’t let them win. But it is hard. I would be on my holidays and it would consume me. People would see it in me, they’d ask if I was okay, is there something going on.”

She says that anyone who wants to post online should have to upload a valid ID, with an address to match. Furthermore, there should be more scope to explain why a report is being made online about somebody, with broader parameters for complaint.

“There needs to be better way of giving detail about the issue – even something like 150 words to explain.” She also believes the Oireachtas should establish a support service whereby women or men could speak to someone who has experience of these issues so they can get advice on what steps they feasibly can take.

Finally, she says that many of the abusive messages she receives are from people who send them knowing that because she is a public representative, she probably won’t speak out about it. “They rely on the fact that I do the job I do.” Speaking out, she believes, might finally help to highlight the reality of what is happening, particularly for women across all levels of politics.