

Comment from Ginger Gorman, journalist, cyberhate expert and author of “Troll Hunting”:

Sadly, the predator trolling that Leigh Sales has received this week is not unique. Cyberhate against female public figures – such as journalists, politicians and athletes – is emerging as a democratic threat around the globe. It is silencing women’s voices and making them unable to do their jobs and participate in public life.

This is not an accident. Misogynistic trolling such as this, is usually (but not exclusively) perpetrated by young white men who operate in syndicates or groups. It is highly organised.

These men police discourse with themselves at the top of the food chain. They are trying to maintain what they perceive it to be their rightful place in the hierarchy, and they attack anyone who they consider may threaten this position – this includes women, people of colour, disabled people and people who are LGBTIQ+.

From my research, I can also tell you that women get attacked by predator trolls more viciously if they are taking up space in domains that have traditionally been occupied by men. Journalism is one of those professions.

Trolls attack where they believe to be a person’s weakest point. So, this is why women are always attacked online in ways that are violent and sexual. With female targets, predator trolls often threaten their children too.

It’s dangerous to ask: ‘What should the victim do to stop this? How should the victim behave?’ because it’s a kind of victim blaming. Imagine saying this to a domestic violence victim!

It’s not up to the victim to stop this. The social media companies - private corporations that make billions of dollars from our data - have created town squares where we are coming to grave harm AND they have no duty of care to the public. They are profiting from our distress. The Australian Government needs to legislate so platforms are accountable. And law enforcement must be resourced and trained to deal with this.