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Threats, abuse prompt female MPs to leave UK parliament

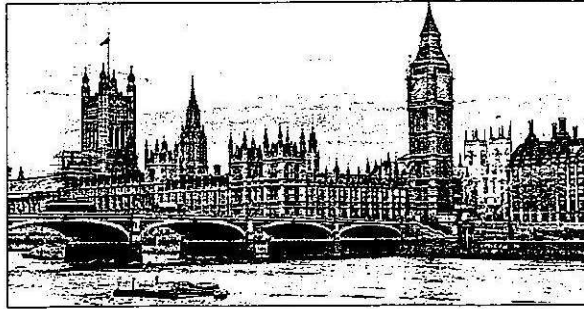
18 Women Have Said They Will Not Contest Dec 12 Election

Megan Specia

London: Threats of sexual violence. Death threats. Racist abuse. Female members of Britain's parliament have long said that this type of vitriolic abuse, both online and off, is increasingly common. Now, several women who have decided not to run for reelection when British voters go to the polls next month said abuse, threats and a culture of intimidation are significant reasons they are leaving parliament.

"I am exhausted by the invasion into my privacy and the nastiness and intimidation that has become commonplace," Heidi Allen, a member of parliament, wrote in a detailed letter to her constituents explaining why she will not be on the ballot. "Nobody in any job should have to put up with threats, aggressive emails, being shouted at in the street, sworn at on social media, nor have to install panic alarms at home."

Allen is among more than 50 members of parliament, including 18 women, who have said they will not stand in the December 12 election. And while that ratio roughly mirrors parliament's overall gender breakdown, women's rights activists worry that this climate could deter other women from entering national politics, reversing a trend that had brought the propor-



Activists fear this climate could deter women from entering politics

PM spars with rivals on Brexit, Trump

British PM Boris Johnson and opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn traded blows on Tuesday over Brexit and Donald Trump at the onset of a bruising pre-Christmas election campaign. Johnson's main rival in the snap December 12 poll has struggled to explain his position on Brexit. Labour's new official stance is to negotiate a more EU-friendly withdrawal agreement with Brussels and then let voters decide whether to back it or simply stay in the EU. "Now the time has come for you to come clean," Johnson told Corbyn in a letter released by his office. Corbyn shot back that Labour was putting back to the people an issue that politicians have been unable to resolve for more than three years. He accused Johnson of selling out British interests to US President Donald Trump in an effort to strike a lucrative post-Brexit trade agreement. AFP

tion of female lawmakers in the House of Commons to an all-time high of 32%.

Rights groups also said that an increasingly bitter political climate surrounding Brexit has fuelled the flames — as did recent remarks by PM Boris Johnson on the treatment of female lawmakers. In a parliamentary debate in September, Johnson dismissed such threats as "numb"

and said that lawmakers had only themselves to blame for the hostile political climate.

Many women in parliament — both those who will be candidates in the election and those who will not — said they have been subject to online abuse, threats and intimidation. "Sexually charged rhetoric has been prevalent in the online abuse of female MPs, with threats to rape us and re-

ferring to us by our genitalia," Caroline Spelman, a Conservative lawmaker who is stepping down after 22 years in parliament, wrote in an opinion piece in Times of London. "It is therefore not surprising that so many good female colleagues have decided to stand down at this election."

The situation even prompted 72 female members of parliament to sign a letter of solidarity to Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, who has spoken about the difficulty of public life in Britain.

"We share understanding of the abuse and intimidation which is now so often used as a means of disparaging women in public office from getting on with our very important work," the letter read.

Women of colour in parliament were subjected to the highest levels of online abuse during that campaign, the report found. And nearly half of the tweets examined were directed at Diane Abbott, a Labour lawmaker who was the first black woman elected to parliament.

Some male politicians have also experienced threats of violence, online abuse and attacks in recent years. A Labour member of parliament had homophobic graffiti sprayed on his office last month, and in 2010 another Labour lawmaker was stabbed by a constituent. NYT NEWS SERVICE