Ableism in Academia
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Both feminist and disability studies scholars have written about the need for the academy and activism to work closely together, to produce theoretical and empirical understandings and to challenge social barriers facing women and disabled people (Pétursdóttir 2017; Stone and Priestley 1996). As feminist and disability researchers we consciously aim to be activist scholars to a greater or lesser extent. This informs our research and teaching practice, our empirical approaches, our epistemologies, our choice of topics to research and teach and our methodological approaches. Many of us seek to engage with the wider non-academic world, to ensure our work has policy and practice relevance and impact.

However, it is a very different thing to step outside the relatively protected and rarefied world of the academy and attempt to engage with the world of political activism. There have been very few studies that incorporate political activism and look at the ‘velvet triangle’ (Holli 2008) between the academy, activism and political participation. This chapter is a reflection on the findings of a participant ethnographic study of the 2017 general election in the UK. I ran for Parliament as a disabled and feminist activist while maintaining my role as an academic. I encountered both resistance and support from all three sectors, and in this chapter, I explore the empirical challenges faced by academic activists working in more than one sector. I draw on both feminist and disability studies theory to explain the findings, and examine policies and practices that could help support more effective activist engagement.
and partnership working across the academic/activist divide. Drawing on the evidence from political science and social policy, I argue for significant changes in working practices to support women and disabled people in political engagement. Finally, I reflect on what this means for feminist and disability activism within the academy.

Reflections on my position

Intellectually, my feminism came from my experience as an undergraduate. I was raped by an ex-boyfriend, and I was studying law at the time. I was very aware of the theoretical and legal barriers facing women who experience rape, and I very quickly became aware of the real-life practical issues as well. When I made a complaint to my university, I was told that the perpetrator had ‘suffered enough’ by being questioned and there was no point taking more formal action against him. When I tried to report it to the police, I was told in no uncertain terms that because I had been drinking at the time of the attack, he was my ex and I had willingly opened the door of my dorm to him, there was absolutely no case to be made. The fact that it was violent and non-consensual, even that it was admitted as such by the perpetrator, was irrelevant. The only theoretical approach to the world that made sense and did not blame me was feminism. So, like many women, I experienced the reality of women’s oppression before I found a language and theoretical base to explain it. The personal became political: I moved from being an activist to being an academic.

From a disability perspective, I came to it from the other direction. I carried out postgraduate research into feminism and disability because, drawn to writers such as Oliver, Barnes and Morris, I found interesting and under-explored connections between the structural oppression facing women and that facing disabled people. In particular, I was interested in the relative lack of attention paid to disability issues within feminism, and to feminist issues within disability studies – an issue which, thanks to writers such as Morris, is no longer the case. Then I was in a car accident and broke my pelvis, had an autistic son, developed psoriatic arthritis and then fibromyalgia, and also complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Within the space of a few short years my interest in disability studies went from being theoretical to real lived experience. The political became personal: I moved from being an academic to being an activist.

In both roles I have always had a foot in both camps, but have been at heart driven by my academic role. I have used my research findings to
support third-sector stakeholders and to inform policy and practice, as well as campaigning as an individual citizen on issues, but still drawing on my academic knowledge. This project took me to a very different area of activism: running for elected office as a political activist, placing the corporeal reality of myself as a disabled feminist into the material reality of political campaigning. It enabled me to reflect on the key similarities and differences between ableism and activism within and outwith the academy.

Background

Activism, politics and the academy

For many academics, the act of being an academic is in itself political. Chomsky argued that the academy has a political responsibility as a result of its privileged status:

  For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth behind the veil of misrepresentation, ideology and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us. (Chomsky 1969, 324)

However, for many others, it is not enough to exercise that privilege within the relative safety of academia. While activists can be found within many disciplines, the separation of the two roles is often actively encouraged (Flood et al. 2013). In disciplines where rationality, objectivity and the scientific method are particularly valued, the very nature of political or activist engagement appears to be antithetical to academic enquiry (Martin 2009). However, most social science disciplines have engaged with the idea that positionality has its merits, and encourage researchers to engage emotionally and politically with the matter of their research (Maxey 1999).

Both feminism and disability rights scholarship go further than acceptance of political engagement. They actively encourage academics to embrace both being activists and engaging in intellectual enquiry, and for each role to inform the other. Indeed, an ongoing critique of women’s studies is that it is too overtly political (Sommers 1994). Eschle and Maiguashca point out that creating space for feminism within the academy is in itself a political act, and that most feminists within the academy do more:
Feminists have established their own sites of knowledge production that aim to bridge the gap between universities and the feminist movement, ranging from consciousness-raising groups to autonomous women’s colleges, and from women’s libraries to women’s studies and latterly gender studies programmes in universities. (Eschle and Maiguashca 2006, 120)

Disability studies goes further, and claims that scholars who do not engage in activism to support disabled people or actively fight oppression are simply adding to their oppression. Research should actively seek to improve material circumstances (Oliver 1992). Stone and Priestley go so far as to call non-disabled researchers ‘parasites’ unless they embrace an emancipatory and non-objective research paradigm, calling academics to understand that:

the political standpoint of the researcher is tied to political action in challenging oppression and facilitating the self-empowerment of disabled people. The researcher engages in processes of emancipation, rather than merely monitoring them from sympathetic sidelines. (Stone and Priestley 1996, 6)

Therefore, as an academic who embraces both feminism and disability studies as my key theoretical perspectives, the onus is on me to incorporate activism into my research: to not just observe and write about the social world in which women and disabled people are oppressed, but to actively engage in tackling that oppression. In order to do that in the field of women’s and disabled people’s political participation, it was not enough for me to understand from a theoretical perspective how ableism and sexism shaped the experience of academic activists: I had to immerse myself ethnographically in that world as both a means of enquiry and a political act.

Barriers to political participation for women and disabled people

Although in the UK there are no formal barriers to women’s political participation, there are clearly structural barriers that come into play. As of June 2020, 220 (out of 650) Members of Parliament are women in the House of Commons, the elected chamber in the UK. When choosing candidates to run for election, the incumbent always has an advantage, having already proved they can win an election: on current proportions of UK parliamentarians, that means that 66 per cent of the incumbents
standing for re-election are likely to be men. Moreover, unless political parties take proactive measures to increase female party membership generally, and to put female candidates up for election in winnable seats, this proportion will remain static, as structural reasons favour male candidates. Candidates are often chosen from elite networks within the party, with a history and track record of working or volunteering for the party (Close and Kelbel 2019). These elite networks tend to favour privately educated men and those who attended elite higher education institutions, which mitigates against non-middle-class women, black and ethnic minority (BAME) women and disabled women. Moreover, as Shames (2015) and others point out, informal mentoring often plays a huge role in political success, but working women politicians often do not have resources spare to undertake that mentoring for the potential next generation of political women.

Socio-cultural barriers, such as seeing leadership as a ‘male’ quality, mean that female candidates face implicit selection bias (Alexander 2012). Moreover, political campaigning and working as an elected representative are jobs that tend to lead to high numbers of working hours, being away from home for lengthy periods, late nights and other working conditions that are not conducive to balancing family and work commitments. This impacts far more directly on mothers than on fathers, both practically and culturally, and for low-income women who cannot afford childcare or mothers of disabled children for whom there may not be appropriate childcare available, this makes campaigning inaccessible. These barriers also apply to women with caring responsibilities involving disabled adults, although these receive less attention than childcare.

Barriers to political participation for disabled people

As of June 2020 there are only five MPs in the House of Commons who self-identify as disabled, a rate of 0.8 per cent compared to around 17 per cent of the general population, and 50 per cent of the over-65s. The same elite networks who provide the male political class also provide an able-bodied political class: disabled people are excluded from higher education, particularly from elite institutions. Able-bodied people are 40 per cent more likely than disabled people to go to university. Disabled activism and the disability rights movement have grown exponentially since challenges to segregated residential care and the rise of the social model of disability (Campbell and Oliver 1996), and this has translated into what Young calls the ‘plural activities of civic associations’ (Young 2002, 153). Disabled people volunteer, self-organise and are politically
engaged around specific issues such as benefits, social care, housing, transport and other areas that affect their lives. However, this civic engagement has not translated into participation in mainstream politics in the same way that feminist activism has.

There are structural reasons for this relative lack of participation. As well as exclusion from elite institutions and networks, disabled people are far less likely than able-bodied people to be working in elite professions with clear links to party political engagement such as journalism, law and higher education. European research has found a clear link between income and political participation, with higher-income groups being far more likely to engage than lower-income groups (Priestley et al. 2016). Disabled people are far more likely to be living in poverty and experiencing social exclusion in terms of employment, education, relative income and material deprivation than able-bodied people: they are thus less likely to have access to, or the resources to support, political participation. As Postle and Beresford (2007) point out, disabled people did not magically acquire the resources to self-organise: for ‘user’ movements to be able to engage effectively with policymakers and service providers took a lot of capacity building and a significant change in culture on the part of those in power. In addition, services and support for disabled people are largely focused on either the private sphere (e.g. social care support for personal care needs) or employment. There are very few services that are specifically to support disabled people to participate in civic and political activities.

In many ways disabled people face similar cultural barriers to women: they are not seen as natural leaders and so face implicit selection bias when seeking to run for office. Guldvik et al. point out that:

At an individual level, political participation depends in part on the candidate's resources and her/his motivation. Disabled people have to varying degrees resources such as education, income, organizational affiliation, and social capital. In addition, the motivation to participate politically also varies amongst disabled people. The motivation is related to the degree representatives gain recognition and respect in their role as elected representatives. (Guldvik et al. 2013, 80)

Political campaigning requires a great deal of physical stamina, with late nights and working away from home being the norm during election periods. This can make it inaccessible to disabled people, whose impairment(s) may contribute to the lack of social and structural support
in raising barriers to participation. Guldkvit et al. (2013) found that issues such as the physical and cultural environment in government did not support disabled elected representatives being able to act independently and with influence: as a result they were seen as less effective politically than able-bodied colleagues and less likely to be reselected as political candidates. These socio-cultural barriers are of course in place before disabled people even reach the stage of serving as political representatives, and can act as comprehensive barriers to political participation.

Intersectionality and activism

In trying to make sense of my own experiences as a disabled woman, it is clear that we need to pay attention to the intersectionality of disability and gender. While the term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Crenshaw (1989) to refer to the dual discrimination faced by BAME women, an understanding of the ‘double burden’ of being a disabled woman has underpinned scholarship in feminist and disability studies (Lloyd 2001; Morris 1992). Disabled women face far more than just the ‘double burden’ of disability and femaleness when becoming activists, and when seeking to make the transition from activism to political participation.

Firstly, the structural oppression of lack of resources, and lack of access to elite spaces, acts as a compound barrier for disabled women. Disabled women are at risk of poverty because of lack of access to material resources, social care and support to participate in public life generally. Moreover, in engaging in civic activism in disability rights – which recognises the structural oppression faced by those with impairments, but not necessarily faced by women – disabled women can encounter sexism or gender blindness within their own activist organisations. Issues include a lack of recognition of the additional risks disabled women face in engaging in public life. Disabled women are at significant risk of sexualised violence and domestic abuse, lack of understanding and support for complex caring and parenting responsibilities, and a lack of awareness of feminist political issues. See, for example, disabled organisations’ campaigns to support ‘sex work’ and prostitution as a way of enabling disabled men to access women’s bodies with little thought of the harm and violence to women inherent in that approach. Disabled women who are active feminists also face ableism within the feminist movement: for example, by focusing on childcare as a structural oppression, feminist organisations often leave out access to social care and support; by focusing on the gendered nature of informal caring, feminist organisations often ignore disabled women’s
disempowering experiences of being reliant on informal care, and of their own experiences of giving care.

Secondly, disabled women also face more than the ‘double burden’ of socio-cultural expectations arising from being disabled and female. They are seen as passive, as recipients rather than givers of care, as both sexualised and not sexualised enough for not conforming to ableist and sexist standards of appearance and bodily autonomy. They are definitely not seen as active, charismatic leaders in the male able-bodied model.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially just and socially conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product (Ellis et al. 2010).

In seeking to establish the legitimacy of feminist approaches to social science research, Gilligan (1982) found that women’s experiences were often ignored or downplayed as they did not easily fit deductive, rational approaches to empirical enquiry. As a result, different approaches to feminist social enquiry have been developed which place an onus on the researcher not just to centre the experiences of women, but also to reflectively position the researcher within the research process. At the same time there are strong arguments for those engaging in feminist research to seek not just to observe, record and explain the experiences of women in academic terms, but to treat the research process itself as a political act. As Ackerly and True remind us:

many feminist researchers share a ‘sense of accountability to the women’s movement’ conceived as a changing and contested discourse […] They seek to do research that is explicitly of value to women and that could result in actions that are beneficial to women. (Ackerly and True 2010, 465)

Similar challenges are articulated within disability studies. As part of a growing political consciousness, disabled people have rejected being the ‘objects’ of rational empiricism, seeing it as part of the social oppression they face (Oliver 1992). The history of the relationship between scientific
research and the oppression of disabled people is a long and troubled one, including segregation, eugenics and systematic human rights abuses (Stone and Priestley 1996). Moreover, social science enquiry, even that which steps away from the rationalist paradigm, has tended to place researchers in a powerful position vis-à-vis the researched, placing disabled people firmly in the latter category. Non-disabled researchers who are not part of an anti-oppressive political movement are seen as part of the problem, not the solution to disabled people’s oppression.

Disabled people have come to see research as a violation of their experience, as irrelevant to their needs and as failing to improve their material circumstances and quality of life. (Oliver 1992, 105)

Moreover, both feminist and disability studies point out the dangers of empirical detachment from the process of research. They argue that researchers must reflexively locate themselves in the research process, reflecting on their influence and positionality (Burman 2006), and that research is an embodied experience (Longhurst 2011). Perhaps because disability studies has, until fairly recently, sought to shift attention away from the body towards the social construction of disability, there is less of a history of autoethnography as an embodied approach to research. However, it has been used to explore the disabled experience by disabled researchers in creative ways (Baurhoo 2017). There is, arguably, no more thorough way to be reflexive than to turn the research focus on yourself, to subject your own life and actions to scrutiny. Before presenting findings, I will briefly outline how I employed autoethnography.

I had been selected to run as a candidate for election to the UK Parliament by the Women’s Equality Party. In order to gain the ‘insider’s perspective’ of the issues facing women and disabled people as they take part in political activity, particularly when running for election, I kept a fieldwork diary over the course of my campaign, writing up my fieldnotes at the end of each day whilst the observations were fresh in my mind. I also gathered data through photographs, social media engagement, newspaper articles, communications such as emails and WhatsApp discussions and other related data. After the campaign was over, I undertook inductive thematic analysis on my data, testing the reliability and validity of emerging themes with some of my campaign team. It was not possible to obtain informed consent from everyone I encountered: indeed, this would have run contrary to the approach to ethnography endorsed by Bulmer (1982), which stresses that to gain insight into social worlds it is necessary to be a covert rather than overt observer.
It is beyond doubt that those I was observing would have changed their behaviour had they known they were taking part in a research project rather than purely an election campaign. In situations where covert observation is used, there is a particular onus on the researcher to protect the identities of those involved, so all have been given aliases, identifying characteristics have been changed and my fieldwork notes have a coded date stamp. For the purposes of this chapter, I have focused on the findings related to the resistance and support I encountered from the three corners of the ‘velvet triangle’ of the academy, activists and other candidates/parties and the public.

Resistance and support from the academy

I encountered both individual and structural resistance from the academy. I declared my intention to run as a candidate, and when I explained to senior management that I was intending to write it up as an ethnographic study they were supportive. However, this soon changed. I gave an interview to a local newspaper discussing why I was running, and I made the point that 25 years after my experience of sexual assault on campus, women in universities were still experiencing the same thing. The local paper ran this particularly lurid heading: ‘My election bid is driven by campus sex attack’. I was accused of bringing the institution into disrepute, which is gross misconduct, despite it being very clear that I was not responsible for the phrasing or the way the article was written. This was, understandably, very distressing. Although it was not followed up as a formal complaint, it was referred to in a later unconnected formal disciplinary action against me as evidence of a ‘pattern of behaviour’ that justified a formal sanction. However, the following extract from my fieldwork notes shows that this newspaper article was not necessarily harmful to my political campaign:

At the end of the hustings [Mr C, candidate for party C] approached me and said ‘Well done on that headline in the [local paper]. We’d love to get free publicity like that.’ (Datestamp 14.6)

This was ‘free publicity’ I was at best ambivalent about. On the one hand, it was a deliberately sexualised manipulation of my story, one that got me into trouble at work. On the other hand, it was also a way of reaching an audience that I would not have been able to with any other kind of story. Notably, most of the interview was actually about my care for my disabled son, which did not feature in the article at all.
Resistance and support from activists

This is the finding that was the most surprising to me. I received very little support from women’s groups, despite having previously been active in many. One group, on whose board I had served for many years, refused to invite me to an equalities hustings they were organising. Another, whom a fellow political party member was working for, went so far as to make a formal complaint about me:

Emotional lecture on domestic abuse today, coincided with the Manchester bombing. As ‘host’ I gave an introductory speech saying I wasn’t canvassing but we should remember that an attack on young women and girls attending a pop concert was a form of violence against women and girls, just like domestic abuse. Afterwards a woman from [Scottish Women Against Rape] approached me and said ‘That was canvassing and it was out of order.’ I apologised. Got home to email from WEP Head Office that official complaint had been made by the organisation. Told Head Office what I had actually said, backed up by fellow WEP members at the lecture. Told ‘no, it doesn’t sound like canvassing to me either but feelings are running high so please apologise in writing’. (Datestamp 11.5)

This was in sharp contrast to the support I received from the disability sector. I asked a fellow activist from a local carers’ organisation to come and introduce me at my launch campaign:

Discussed with [Ms P] from [Caring Stirling] what she would say at my launch. She said she and the organisation were thrilled I was running for office and highlighting social care as an issue of equality for women, as no-one else presented it like that. She also said that due to restrictions she could not appear in public to endorse me as her organisation would break the terms of their funding. We agreed that she would do a ‘vox pop’ interview with me off camera, and invite her workers to attend my launch as a compromise. Her support meant a lot. (Datestamp 1.1)

I had hoped to apply to the ‘Access to Elected Office’ fund for help with equipment and personal assistance during my campaign, but it transpired that this fund was not available to candidates running for general
elections, only Scottish Parliament elections. However, the disability organisation who ran that fund were very helpful and supportive, offering to put me in touch with former candidates from different political parties who had previously been successful, and to try to find equipment for me. There were no negative reactions from disability or carers’ organisations, only unmitigated support. This was in sharp contrast to the negative reactions and lack of support from women’s organisations.

Resistance and support from the public and political sector

Being honest about my personal experiences of sexual violence enabled me to connect to other survivors:

After hustings, several women approach me in tears and say they are so pleased I spoke out about rape because they had experienced it too and no other party seemed to be taking it seriously. As I turned to shake hands with my opponent [Ms W, Candidate for party D], she surprisingly gave me a hug and said ‘Me too. Thank you.’ (Datestamp 12.5)

I found repeatedly that the personal, emotional connection with potential voters that came after I shared my experiences of being a rape survivor, carer, disabled person or someone with mental health issues was a very powerful one for both me and them. One audience member emailed me after listening to me on local radio:

Email from [Mrs T] has really touched me. ‘I am so glad you are speaking up about your experiences. If people in public do this more, it can end the stigma of mental health. I think this is so important.’ (Datestamp 9.5)

I also received support from the public for being a ‘visibly’ disabled candidate. One participant in a hustings for learning-disabled people made this point:

‘I like that you are disabled. More disabled people should be MPs. MPs don’t understand how hard we have to fight for jobs, for transport, just to be heard. If they did they would help us more.’ (Datestamp 10.1)
This was in contrast to the sexist attacks I received both online and in person:

At hustings for learning-disabled people, and my opposition clearly doesn’t really understand the question about benefits and mobility cars. When I speak I emphasise that austerity is hitting disabled people very hard, and this removes their independence and makes it harder for them to work, putting pressure on carers. [Mr S, Candidate for Party A] interrupts me and says loudly ‘It’s time for you to shut up now, the women have spoken long enough.’ I was pretty shocked at this, as were the audience. His fellow male candidate [Mr C, Candidate for Party C] laughed and appealed to the (mainly male) audience: ‘Women, eh?’ (Datestamp 10.1)

I did encounter ableism from the general public. Several people asked me during hustings and canvassing if I would ‘be able to manage’ the work of an MP with crutches. I gave an interview to a national newspaper, in which I described why, as a professor and as a political candidate, I needed a PA to keep me organised because of the ‘brain fog’ that goes along with fibromyalgia and PTSD, which received the following online comment:

Em. I don’t wish to be unkind but do voters want their Bills scrutinised by someone with intellectual deficits this severe?! Absolutely, Parliament should be made accessible, but MPs are public servants and have to have the capacity to serve the public properly. (http://www.thenational.scot/politics/15295758.Here_s why you don’t see more disabled MPs__explains candidate/#comments-anchor, accessed 16 June 2020)

I am fairly sure as a professor I had already demonstrated in that article that I did not have ‘intellectual deficits’.

This questioning of my abilities was also a tactic used by my political opponents. During one hustings, a question was raised about the funding and delivery of social care, to which I gave quite a detailed answer. Mr S, Candidate for party A, then got up and shouted: ‘No-one knows what to do about social care, not even the so-called professor.’ I am still not sure if this was ableism or sexism, but it was certainly an attempt to demean my status and expertise. Later in that same hustings a member of the audience asked us to speak up, as she was having difficulty hearing us:
Mr C [candidate for party C] said we should all stand up so we could be seen and heard better. I, obviously, can’t stand up. All three male candidates stood, and Ms W [candidate for party D] says, ‘No, that’s not fair to Kirstein,’ and remains seated. I am now very conscious that the two female candidates look weaker than the men because they are sitting down. (Datestamp 12.1)

I encountered numerous incidences of this, as well as inaccessible venues with steps, where I was made to feel I was being difficult, or sat somewhere away from other candidates. Some audience members noted this and commented to me afterwards that it was done deliberately and was unfair. It is interesting that the only other female candidate often showed solidarity with me – by moving, commenting or helping – and the male candidates never did.

Discussion

Intersectionality, ableism and sexism

There is no doubt in my mind, based on the analysis of my findings, that every stage of the political process demonstrates clear evidence of both ableism and sexism. From the moment someone decides to make the transition from grassroots and/or academic activist to engaging in political action as a member of a political party campaigning for election, there are substantial physical, social and attitudinal barriers to be overcome, and these are not insubstantial.

The ableism I faced in political life was much more overt than I had faced in academia and activism. This was not from my own political party, who were very willing to support me and use their limited resources to try to overcome some of the barriers I faced as a disabled candidate. However, the women’s movement, the other political parties and the public demonstrated clearly that the able-bodied political candidate was the norm, and everyone else was somehow diminished, flawed and not as desirable (Campbell and Oliver 1996). To a certain extent, working in the academy, with an institutional framework intended to protect me against disability discrimination, had left me ill prepared for the level of overt ableism I faced outside that relatively protected environment. I had encountered what Campbell and Oliver (1996) call ‘microaggressions’. This included expectations of performance that did not account for my impairment, such as a failure to take my impairment
into account during formal processes. However, I had also encountered a lot of goodwill to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ for my impairment – for example, excusing me from certain tasks that were not core to my job, supporting me to work flexibly and funding extra support for travel. I had also encountered a willingness to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ in my activist life: for example, moving meetings to more accessible venues, enabling PA support and taking into account the inaccessibility of public transport for me. However, that willingness was markedly absent within the sphere of political campaigning. I was not able to access funding for equipment that would have enabled me to carry out the canvassing work that is crucial to a political campaign. Organisers of hustings, debates, events and media coverage were not willing to accommodate my needs, often citing the ‘fairness’ aspect of possibly giving me an unfair advantage. Yet from my perspective at least it was levelling the playing field and removing the unfair advantage that able-bodied candidates had. There was also a difference between attitudes towards my physical impairment, where people were sometimes more willing to make adjustments and less willing to tolerate overt ableism from others, and the cognitive/mental health elements of my impairment, where it was more acceptable to call into account my capacity and refuse to make adjustments for me. The stigma surrounding mental health issues compared to physical impairments was particularly noticeable.

I was more prepared for the overt sexism I encountered on the campaign trail. This, again, was not from my own party, but it was very clear from other political parties and the public. I encountered abuse on social media, comments and questions about my appearance, questions about my children (which were never directed at male candidates), mild threats, efforts to silence me by complaining to my employer and several other tactics well known to feminists with a public presence in political life. My own ‘red lines’ on this involved my family: any attempt to involve them, identify them, stalk them or use them triggered an instant involvement of whatever formal protection I could invoke. For everything else I developed a thick skin and tried to ignore it. The level of abuse was relatively mild – in fact, I had encountered far more worrying abuse from men’s rights activists in the course of my academic job than I did during political campaigning.

Here I am going to reflect on two elements of intersectionality that acted in my favour and offered me some protection: class and race. As a well-educated woman and despite the taunts, I am not a ‘so-called’ professor. I have been a professor on merit – i.e. based on my international reputation for the quality and significance of my research – for
over ten years, so I was well placed in the campaign. My knowledge was respected: often more so than that of my fellow candidates from other political parties, even from supporters of those parties. I could more than hold my own in debates, hustings and media appearances because I had a wealth of knowledge and experience of engaging publicly with students, stakeholders, practitioners and policymakers. My education and my middle-class background and, in the context of a Scottish election, sounding like a posh Englishwoman gave me a status and confidence that to some extent mitigated the ableism and sexism I encountered.

It was also clear when compared to my sister candidates in the Women’s Equality Party and other parties that I enjoyed a great deal of protection due to my race. As a white woman I did not encounter the overt racism (sometimes very violent) directed at black women campaigning politically during the general election. I was not perceived to have Jewish heritage, so I did not encounter any overt anti-Semitism either (again, not a protection always offered to Jewish women campaigning politically).

Structural and individual challenges

I certainly encountered both structural and individual challenges that tie in with what the literature tells us about the sexism and ableism faced by political candidates. When I discovered I would not be eligible for funding under the ‘Access to Elected Office’ scheme, I asked my political party for funding for a PA. They needed to check with the Electoral Commission whether or not this counted as ‘allowable expenses’ under campaigning laws. It transpired that the Women’s Equality Party were the first to ask if childcare was an allowable expense, and the first to ask if personal assistance for a disabled candidate was an allowable expense. This indicates either that other political parties in the UK are supporting candidates with childcare and personal support needs and not declaring the expenditure, which is unlikely given the severe penalties for breaking campaigning laws, or they are not supporting candidates directly in this way.

There is no equivalent to the ‘Access to Elected Office’ fund for people with parenting and caring commitments, who are overwhelmingly women. Moreover, it became clear to me that the incumbent does not have an advantage just in terms of being selected by their party, but also during campaigning. For them, running for office is part of their day job, for which they are still drawing a salary: they can engage in it full-time with all the support that comes with a job. This also applies to
other candidates with political roles, for example, elected councillors. For the other candidates, campaigning needs to be fitted in alongside other commitments: in my case working full-time, being a parent and carer, managing my own impairments and having the resources to deal with the micro- and macroaggressions of ableism and sexism in the workplace and in activist life.

Many of the barriers to engagement with political activism faced by disabled women begin way before the ‘end’ of engaging directly with political campaigning. There is no structural support for those who are not candidates for elected office, for example canvassers, campaigners, workers and volunteers. Activism is resource heavy and it favours those who have the structural and individual supports in place: these are overwhelmingly middle-class, well-connected, able-bodied women. I acquired my impairments relatively late in life (in my late twenties), by which time I had already had several years of a privileged middle-class upbringing, private schooling and a degree from an elite Russell Group university. I had begun to establish my academic career and reputation, and I could draw on these advantages as my impairments and the resulting social, environmental and attitudinal barriers that I faced grew worse. Indeed, when I developed serious mobility problems from psoriatic arthritis and fibromyalgia, and mental health issues from PTSD, I was already a professor with a reputation for activism and engagement with the women’s and disability sector, and had been for five years.

On activism within the academy

Here I will reflect on what this journey means for academic activism within the academy, rather than crossing the velvet triangle to political activism. Firstly, most of us within the academy do not see our own privilege and our protected status. While we do encounter microaggressions connected with social divisions, particularly along the lines of gender, race and disability, they are nowhere near the level of the macroaggressions that we encounter in political life. While being passed over for promotion or feeling bullied and harassed may make our jobs more difficult than those of our more privileged colleagues, it is rare for an academic to receive death and rape threats from their colleagues or managers. When such macroaggressions happen, we are relatively protected by our institutions: there are policies and procedures, as well as legal safeguards, available to help us. That is not to say that these macroaggressions are not real and painful, nor that they do not have a material impact on our lives – not least in terms of our income, mental
health, physical safety and wellbeing. But – even though the onus is on us to invoke those protections – there are some protections and mitigations in place within the academy.

This is simply not the case for women and disabled political activists. Although they have some legal protections, they are often isolated and have to develop a far higher level of personal resilience to cope with the abuse and violence that they attract simply by being a woman (and a disabled person) in a public space. I would argue that this places a responsibility on academic activists to be brave and resilient and to take advantage of this protection, not just on behalf of themselves, but also for their sister activists without such protections. We academics should be calling out the public abuse of female politicians, and ableism in politics, every time we encounter it. We should also be turning our theoretical and empirical resources to documenting and explaining this abuse far more than we do. This has less of an impact on us than calling out the abuse and ableism we experience ourselves: collective action and sisterhood against ableism and sexism is both powerful and necessary for our survival.

Secondly, the skills and protections that we use as academics are not the same as those that political activists need, and being a good academic activist does not necessarily make you a good political activist. While politicians need to be able to understand complex data, and communicate and persuade effectively, they also have to demonstrate charismatic leadership and the ability to network within their own political party, to gain access to elite spaces where a much wider range of skills other than intellectual ability are valued. Some of us have those skills and abilities, but others simply do not. We are better allies to political activists if we use our protected elite spaces wisely. This project demonstrated to me that I am more effective in supporting social change as a good activist academic than as a poor politician. Moreover, the skills that make someone a good politician probably mitigate against them being a good academic: you cannot, by definition, be impartial or cautious about your theoretical and empirical claims as a politician, and as a responsible academic, you probably should be.

**Conclusions**

On reflection, the ableism and sexism faced by disabled women as they enter political campaigning reflects the ableism and sexism they encounter in everyday life. Substantial barriers exist for us in accessing
elite spaces from which political candidates are drawn; and those barriers inhibit access to political parties and political spaces generally. Activism within the academy and within non-party political organisations is not risk-free or resource-neutral for those of us who engage in it: but it does not come with the much higher risks and resource demands of political activism.

The answer to the question ‘why are there not more disabled women in politics?’ is, then, because there are not more disabled women in public life generally, and because political organisations do not make enough effort to tackle structural ableism and sexism. Those of us with the resources can overcome the barriers to political engagement. Those of us with the protection of class, education and race have more capacity to overcome the ableism and sexism we face in public life. One key to improving political life and disabled women’s chances and experiences of engaging with it would be to ensure that those resources are much more widely available. Access to adequate unconditional income, to proper care and support services, to high-quality affordable or free childcare, and to aids and equipment without having to go through endless obstacles and fighting would transform disabled women’s lives. It would enable them to participate fully in political life and I would argue that politics would be vastly improved.

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References


