

An illustration of a woman with her hair in braids, wearing a red cardigan over a blue top, sitting at a desk and typing on a laptop. The background is a warm, orange and yellow glow with abstract digital lines and shapes. The title 'Byte Bullies' is overlaid in large white text.

# Byte Bullies

A report on Online Violence Against Women in the 2022 Kenya General Election

# Waonevu wa Baiti

Ripoti ya Ukatili katika Mtandao dhidi ya Wanawake Wanasiasa katika Uchaguzi Mkuu wa Kenya 2022



POLLICY

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May, 2023

## Suggested Citation

Kakande, A., Nyamwire, B., Saturday, B., Mwendwa, I., (2023) Byte Bullies.



## **Acknowledgements**

We express our heartfelt appreciation to the entire team at the *National Democratic Institute (NDI)* for their invaluable assistance in facilitating this research endeavor. The *Kenya Women Parliamentary Association (KEWOPA)* continue to support women politicians in Kenya and their role in this research remains immeasurable. Our fellow *Design 4 Democracy (D4D)* coalition members *CREAW-Kenya* for steadfast support in the lexicon building in Kenya.

We would also like to thank our peer reviewers Akoth Carvota, Kanyali Mwikya, Elaine Wangari Thuo and many others for their guidance, wisdom, and time in contributing to strengthening this report.

Lastly, we extend our gratitude to the women politicians in Kenya for their presence, resilience, and valuable contributions to the democratic proceedings and governance of the nation.

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# abbreviations

<b>FIDA:</b>	Federation of Women Lawyers
<b>KEWOPA:</b>	Kenya Women Parliamentary Association
<b>mDAU:</b>	Monetizable Daily Active users
<b>MAU:</b>	Monthly Active Users
<b>OVAW:</b>	Online Violence Against Women
<b>OVAW-P:</b>	Online violence against women in politics
<b>NDI:</b>	National Democratic Institute
<b>SMS:</b>	Short Message Service



# executive summary

## English

The malignant influence of social media, as a ubiquitous and powerful medium of communication in countries all over the world, has brought about a growing era of reflection on the design and use of the internet. This reflection has focused on hate speech, online violence, fake news, and other forms of harmful content perpetuated by online bullies. From the physical world to the digital realm, gender-based discrimination persists and thrives through malignant online practices. Kenya is no exception, as online harassment targets both prominent women and everyday social media users. These harmful behaviors are becoming all too common in our online spaces, perpetuated by social, economic, cultural, and political structures that echo through the medium of digital networks. In order to further understand these malignant practices, we conducted a comprehensive study that tracked and analyzed the online activities of over 250 women and men candidates for political office on Twitter and Facebook during the 2022 Kenya general elections specifically, during the campaign and election period. Our methodologies encompassed a range of techniques, including lexicon-building focus group discussions, data scraping of publicly available profiles, qualitative data analysis, and the development of a Machine Learning model capable of identifying and categorizing instances of online violence and hate speech in both English and Swahili.

The key findings from our study are documented below;

1

The use of social media platforms for engaging with voters and constituents by women politicians remains low in Kenya. 93 percent of the accounts belonging to men candidates were used at least once during 2022 on Facebook compared to 80 percent of the women politician's accounts. On Twitter, 49 percent of accounts belonging to women candidates had less than 5 tweets a month during the campaign period in comparison to 44 percent of those belonging to the men.

2

OVAWP was more prevalent among women candidates than men, especially on Twitter where 2 out of 5 Twitter accounts belonging to women candidates that we monitored experienced sexual harassment.

3

The attacks against Kenyan women politicians were often focused on personal traits or appearance and were sexualized in nature as opposed to their political platform or qualifications.

4

Traditional social roles and cultural barriers restricted women's political involvement, leading to increased instances of online violence. Additionally, factors such as age and party affiliation also made women more vulnerable to harassment and abuse

## Swahili

Athiri ya mitandao ya kijamii, kama njia inayoenea na yenye nguvu ya mawasiliano katika nchi mbalimbali duniani, imeleta zama nyongeza za changamoto. Kwa mfano matamshi ya chuki, vurugu za mtandaoni, habari za uwongo na aina nyinginezo za maudhui yenye madhara yanayoendelezwa na mtandao, wanyanyasaji na wanyanyasaji wa kawaida. Katika ulimwengu wa kidunia hadi ulimwengu wa kidijitali, ubaguzi wa kijinsia unaendelea na hustawi kupitia mazoea mabaya mtandaoni. Katika maswala ya unyanyasaji mtandaoni, Kenya pia haikosekani, kwani unyanyasaji mtandaoni huwalenga wanawake mashuhuri, wanasiasa na watumiaji wa kawaida wa mitandao. Tabia hizi hatarishi zimezidi kuwa za kawaida sana katika nafasi zetu mtandaoni, zikiendelezwa na miundo ya kijamii, kiuchumi, kitamaduni na kisiasa ambayo ni mwangwi kupitia mitandao ya kidijitali. Ili kuelewa zaidi mifumo hii mibovu, Pollicy ilifanya utafiti wa kina uliohusisha kufuatilia na kuchambua matumizi mtandaoni ya zaidi ya wagombea 268 wanawake na wanaume kwenye mitandao ya Twitter na Facebook kipindi cha Uchaguzi Mkuu wa mwaka 2022 Kenya, hususani wakati wa kampeni na kipindi cha uchaguzi. Utafiti huu ulijumuisha mbinu mbalimbali, ikiwa ni pamoja na majadiliano ya vikundi vya kujenga kamusi ya matamshi ya chuki, uchakachuaji wa taarifa wa wasifu unaopatikana kwa umma, uchanganuzi wa ubora wa taarifa, na uundaji wa muundo wa mashine wenye uwezo wa kutambua na kuainisha matukio ya vurugu mtandaoni na matamshi ya chuki katika lugha ya Kiingereza na ya Kiswahili.



Kutokana na utafiti huu, matokeo yalionyesha kwamba;

1

Matumizi ya wanasiasa wanawake kwenye mitandao ya kijamii ili kuwasiliana na wapiga kura na wananchi bado ni madogo nchini Kenya. Asilimia 93 ya akaunti za wagombea wa kiume zilitumika angalau mara moja mwaka 2022 kwenye Facebook, ikilinganishwa na asilimia 80 ya akaunti za wanasiasa au wagombea wanawake. Kwenye mtandao wa Twitter, asilimia 49 ya akaunti za wanawake zilikuwa na maandiko chini ya 5 kwa mwezi kipindi cha kampeni, ikilinganishwa na asilimia 44 za wanaume.

2

Ukatili dhidi ya wanawake wanasiasa (OVAW-P) ilienea zaidi miongoni mwa wagombea wanawake kuliko wanaume, haswa kwenye mtandao wa Twitter ambapo akaunti 2 kati ya 5 za wanawake zilizofuatiliwa zilionesha unyanyasaji wa kijinsia.

3

Mashambulizi dhidi ya wanasiasa wanawake wa Kenya mara nyingi yalilenga masuala ya kibinafsi na ya kingono badala ya sera au sifa.

4

Vikwazo vya kitamaduni na kimila vinavyozuia ushiriki wa wanawake katika siasa vilichangia unyanyasaji mtandaoni, na maswala mengine kama vile, umri na vyama, pia yaliwafanya wanawake kuwa katika hatari zaidi ya kunyanyaswa na kuonewa.

# background

This section presents the use of social media platforms by women politicians for campaigning during election periods and the online violence they face. The section also presents the history of women's participation in politics in Kenya and an overview of the 2022 Kenyan general elections.

## Use of social media platforms for Campaigning during election periods by women politicians

Globally, social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, have grown in popularity and availability (Kaiser, 2014). As of January 2022, there were approximately 11.75 million social media users in Kenya, indicating a 6.8% increase in users since 2021. Facebook had the highest number of users with 9.95 million, while Twitter had approximately 1.35 million users in the country during the same period (Kepios, 2022a).

*Showing the Number of users for Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in 2021 & 2022 Globally*

Social Media Platform	Number of Users (2022)	Number of Users (2021)
Facebook	2.96 Billion	2.85 Billion
Twitter	368 Million	217 Million
WhatsApp	2.44 billion	2.2 Billion

Source: <https://www.statista.com>

The growth in the use of social media platforms has transformed the way individuals communicate and exchange information (Kemp, 2022). These platforms have been used by citizens and voters to obtain information and by political candidates to share their ideas and political platforms, especially during political campaigns. Social media has served the main purpose of affirming political beliefs and strengthening a political base and is therefore an important communication tool used in politics during political campaigns in Kenya (Mwangi and Mberia, 2018). Women pursuing a career in politics utilize the same resources. A research study by Patterson and colleagues (2016) found that more than 85 percent of women politicians across 107 countries used social media platforms, especially during election campaigning. In Kenya, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been used by women politicians as powerful tools for their advancement in their political journeys (Baranowski and Kebede, 2019).. Women politicians have also used social media to reach a wide range of audiences, from voters to reporters, assisting them in achieving greater political parity, organizing support and communicating their political platform to these audiences.

Social media platforms have also made it possible for women political candidates to mobilize supporters, directly reach out to voters, create a positive image, and discover what the public is thinking (Stier et. al., 2018). Women politicians have seen this as a promising opportunity to communicate and interact with larger audiences. The audiences subsequently share information within their own separate networks in a continuous and ever-expanding process. The communication pattern between women political candidates and their voters has become more interactive. Women politicians are embedded in an interactive context that skews their political messages to their immediate audiences' topic preferences (Bode, et. al., 2016). In addition to addressing political topics important to a mass audience, social media has performed several other functions in election campaigns, such as resource collection and allocation (Jungherr, 2016), improving name recognition, and amplifying candidate personality traits of women political candidates (Kobayashi and Ichifuji, 2015).



Boulianne (2016) pointed out that voters have been able to become more acquainted with their future leaders, which has influenced their voting behavior. A research study by Sweinstani (2019) revealed that voter behavior toward women political candidates was associated with the use of digital campaigns in Indonesia. The perceptions and voting behavior of voters were influenced by what women political candidates shared on social media during political campaigns. However, the research study by Taurakoto (2020) revealed that women in Vanuatu lacked the confidence to express themselves on online platforms and concluded that, when strategically used, social media platforms like Facebook can be powerful tools for advancing women's political empowerment. According to Bradshaw et al. (2019), women political candidates have used social media platforms to introduce themselves and their political platforms to citizens, emphasizing that they are the new alternatives to leadership. This has been done by placing more emphasis on sharing the visions and missions of their political programs through manifestos online as a means of building an image of political professionalism.

While social media has been beneficial to women in politics, women are still struggling to break through when it comes to effectively participating in leadership and governance in Kenya. This is because they have been exposed to online violence on social media platforms, which has hindered them from further engaging in political dialogue (Baranowski and Kebede, 2019).

## Online Violence Against Women in Politics

The United Nations Human Rights Council (2018) defines Online Violence Against Women (OVAW) as a form of gender-based violence that utilizes information and communication technology to perpetrate acts of violence against women. The incidence of online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P) has increased, especially with the widespread use of social media platforms and other applications. OVAW-P encompasses all forms of intimidation, coercion, and aggression, seeking to exclude them from politics simply because they are women (NDI, 2022). OVAW-P can take various forms, including but not limited to trolling, insults, body shaming, sexualised, and gendered abuse (Kakande et. al., 2021). Women politicians have continued to experience online abuse and harassment, which has slowed the progress in boosting women's political voice in Kenya (Baranowski and Kebede, 2019). OVAW-P has been used as an instrument to suppress, and exclude women from actively engaging in politics. The continued use of online platforms has provided perpetrators with opportunities to perpetrate OVAW-P, which has had a detrimental impact on women's participation in politics in Kenya.

Online anonymity has made it easier for individuals to harass women from a distance without fear of accountability, leading to increased levels of cyberbullying and abuse. Furthermore, cyberbullying tactics such as doxing, revenge porn, and cyberstalking have been employed to humiliate and intimidate women in politics, often resulting in the loss of reputation and credibility. As a result, policy outcomes have been influenced by the lack of representation of women decision-makers (Gichanga and Orembo, 2022)

Digital technologies have transformed many forms of violence against women in politics into something that can be perpetrated online, across distances and borders without physical contact. Women in politics have faced online violence across digital platforms which have been used as a tool to deliver threats of death, rape, and beatings with most perpetrators being anonymous users.



Women who aspire to leadership positions in politics face various forms of online gender-based violence such as trolling, gender stereotyping, gendered abuse, and sexual harassment, among others. The prevalence of this violence was revealed by a study conducted by Iyer et al (2020), which showed that 28.2 percent of African women residing in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal, and South Africa had experienced some form of online violence. The dominant types of online violence include sexual harassment, offensive name-calling, and stalking. A report by the National Democratic Institute (2019) also found that 3.6 percent of politically active women in Kenya had experienced OVAW-P on Twitter, with insults being the most common type of violence. Additionally, 18 percent of women's accounts monitored during the Uganda 2021 general election experienced sexual violence, while only 8 percent of accounts belonging to men experienced the same. (Kakande et al., 2021).

Online violence experienced by women in politics has its stems from social norms that regard men as leaders and women as subordinates or expect women to fulfill traditional gender responsibilities such as caring for their families (Gichanga and Orembo, 2022). OVAW-P often draws on gendered ideas about women's bodies and their traditional social roles, primarily as mothers and wives, to deny or suppress their suitability or competency in the political sphere. OVAW-P has existed due to the historically manifested social and cultural structures that are inherently rooted in unequal power systems that translate to violence or harassment on the internet and other social media platforms.

Understanding online violence against women in politics and breaking down these barriers that prevent women from equally pursuing and contributing to the public sphere is key to establishing a more representative democracy in Kenya.



## Online gendered disinformation

Belli et al (2021) define online gendered disinformation as the online dissemination of deceitful or erroneous information and visuals about women public figures, journalists, and women political leaders, which employs misogynistic and gendered stereotypes to weaken their engagement in public life. Gendered disinformation online involves the weaponization of rumors and stereotypes, with false, misleading, or hateful narratives being spread using abusive language.

Online gendered disinformation is a particularly detrimental form of OVAW-P, as it is designed to delegitimize and demean women's political participation and sway political outcomes. This form of disinformation commonly employs narratives that target women's gender and sexuality, with the aim of keeping them out of politics, undermining their credibility, and distorting views about gender and diverse people's participation in politics and governance (Bardall, 2023).

In Kenya's increasingly digital world, online gendered disinformation operations have become even more insidious, with far-reaching impacts on those targeted. The spread of gendered disinformation online has been shown to have serious consequences for women's mental health and their ability to fully participate in democratic processes (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Women politicians in Kenya have been particularly vulnerable to image-based disinformation campaigns that manipulate media to sexualize them, create false narratives, and divert attention away from substantive political discourse (Agunwa & Alalade, 2022). The fallout from these campaigns has left women in politics with an unenviable choice between running for political office and facing the public scrutiny and private attacks that come with it.

## History of Women's Participation in Politics in Kenya

The political participation of women in leadership and governance in Kenya has a long history dating from the pre-colonial period through the colonial and post-colonial periods. Between 1901 and 1909, Wangu wa Makeri was the first woman Kikuyu tribal chief (Jones et. al., 2022). Many women in the 1940s and 1950s followed similar feats and participated in the Kenyan liberation struggle against the colonialists (Gathogo, 2017). Women such as Mekatilili wa Menza (Carrier and Nyamweru, 2016) and Muthoni wa Kirima (Waithanwa et. al., 2017) participated in the campaign for the independence of Kenya in 1963. After Kenya's independence in 1963, no woman was elected or nominated in the first parliament (Ndonga et al., 2017), until the second parliament in 1969, when Grace Monica Akech Onyangoas became the first woman Member of Parliament elected in post-independence Kenya (Nation, 2020). The biggest jump occurred in the tenth Parliament when the number of women in Parliament reached 10%.

In the 2017 Kenyan general elections, 21.8% of national parliamentary seats were held by women, and women were elected as governors and senators for the first time, which placed Kenya 106th in the international ranking of women's participation in national parliaments (Ngom et. al., 2022). The 2022 election recorded an increase in the number of women vying for elective posts, resulting in an increased number of women who were successfully elected. Twenty-nine women were elected as members of parliament, 115 as members of the county assembly, eight as deputy governors, and three in the Senate (UNFPA, 2022).

Despite an increase in the proportion of women, the necessary progress was not made to achieve the constitutionally mandated minimum of 33 percent of women in elected office.

The 2010 Constitution of Kenya entrenches the principle of equality and requires that elective and appointive bodies be composed of no more than two-thirds of either gender (Mumma, 2022), which is still far from reality (Africa Barometer, 2021). This has failed due to a number of other challenges faced by women on their path to political office. These include a lack of political support



from their parties, particularly during primaries; opposition from parliamentarians who are men; a lack of funding; gender-based violence against women politicians; patriarchal social structures (Ngom et. al., 2022). Liu (2019) noted that women in politics are faced with gender stereotypes, for example, not considering women as assertive, tough, and competent enough to be "leadership material." Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence (APIGBV) (2017) attributed the slow participation of women in politics in Kenya to low levels of civic and gender awareness, undemocratic institutions and/or policy frameworks. Patriarchal socio-cultural beliefs such as men, heterosexual dominance, and the devaluation of girls and women have also contributed to the slow participation of women in politics.

Despite the historically slow pace of electing women into leadership and governance positions in Kenya, there have been instances where women have proven their capabilities and delivered when given the opportunity. These examples of women succeeding in political positions serve as evidence that women can be effective leaders in Kenya. However, there is still much work to be done to increase women's representation in politics and ensure that they have equal access to opportunities to lead and govern in the country.

### **The Kenyan 2022 General Elections**

Every fifth year, the Kenyan Constitution requires a general election to be held on the second Tuesday of August. The same constitution also requires a presidential election to be held concurrently with the general election (Githinji, 2021). As a result, Kenya's general elections were last held on Tuesday, August 9, 2022. Citizens voted for the President, governors, senators, National Assembly members, and county assembly members (Ombuor, 2022). This was the third general election and the fourth presidential election since the 2010 constitution was ratified.

The Kenyan 2022 elections were marred with political violence and demonstration events. In 2022, nearly 400 riot events were documented, with a reported increase in violent demonstrations



and mob violence during elections for party primaries. Rioting and protest activity reported in the run-up to the 2022 elections was more than reported in the run-up to the 2017 elections, when nearly 110 peaceful protest events and 160 riot events were recorded (OCLED, 2022).

There was violence against women as they campaigned for positions or showed support for candidates. Women suffered harassment, intimidation, backlash, and violence both offline and online (Maina, 2022). When Martha Karua was chosen as the running mate for one of the main presidential contenders, Raila Odinga, she experienced backlash and insulting statements from other political groups. Similarly, Wavinya Ndeti, a candidate for governor of Machakos against three male contenders, suffered an inflammatory campaign painting her as an outsider for marrying a man of different ethnicity, with supporters encouraged not to vote for her as a result (Berry, Yolande, and Muthoni, 2022). While vying for county assembly, Mary Mugure received threatening phone calls and SMS messages. Mugure was also accosted by two men on a motorcycle while walking down the street in order to scare her and get her to step down (Mersie and Omondi, 2022). Following her divorce in 2018, Susan Kihika, one of Kenya's first elected women senators, was bullied for having chosen politics over monogamy. Some Kenyans on Twitter asked that Kihika release her nude photos to show that she is not a man (Gichanga and Orembo, 2022). These cases are far from isolated and illustrate how women politicians have faced unprecedented levels of violence, harassment, intimidation, and backlash both online and offline apparently designed to discourage them from vying for office

## Research questions

The main objective of this study was to assess the impact of online VAW-P in Kenya and determine how it might impact the use of social media platforms by politicians for digital participation.

To achieve the objective, the following research questions were used;

- a** How do women politicians in Kenya use social media platforms for campaigning during the election period?
- b** How does the use of social media platforms differ amongst men and women candidates?
- c** How does online violence against women candidates differ from that experienced by men in regards to factors such as the form of violence experienced and frequency across platforms?
- d** What evidence of OVAW-P exists on social media platforms and how does it manifest?
- e** What is the association between OVAW-P and factors such as their age, frequency of social media use, and electoral results?

# methodology

The study provides insights extracted from a joint qualitative and quantitative study of existing literature, focus group discussions, and raw social media data obtained from Facebook and Twitter, two social media platforms. Facebook and Twitter were ideal because of their widespread usage, availability of APIs, and the wealth of data they provide.

## Time Frame

Raw social media data collected for this study is based on comments and posts published between 9 July to 9 September, representing the 4 weeks before and after the Kenya general election on August 9th, 2022.

## Account Selection

When selecting accounts, we searched through social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, to find accounts or profiles with names similar to those we had in our list of officially nominated candidates. This list of cleared candidates was obtained from the Kenya Gazette notice no. 7995 published online, dated 1st July 2022.

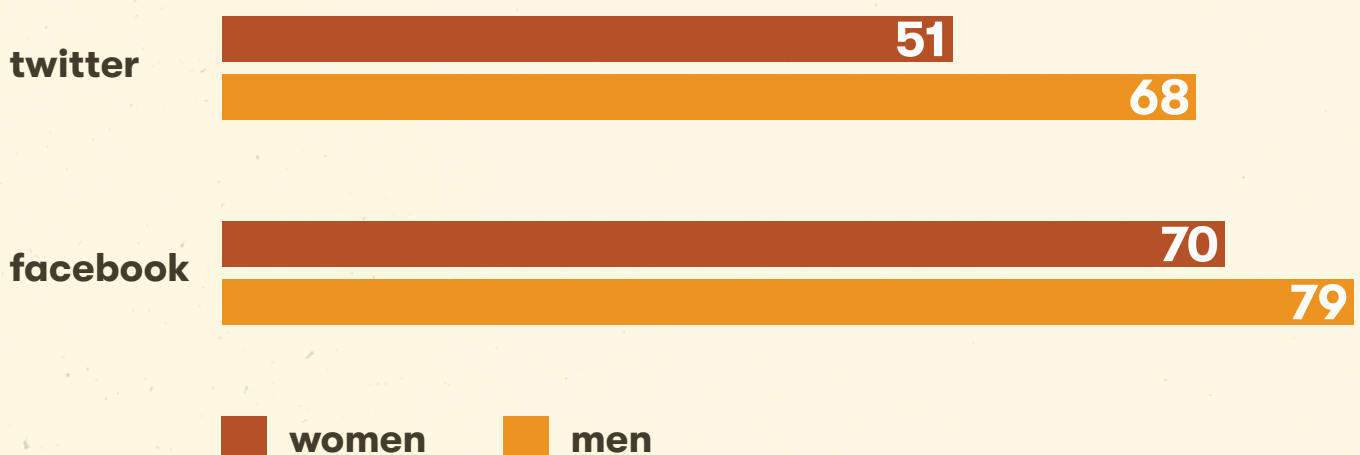
Once these were identified, we then looked through the posted content on the accounts, profile pictures, and profile descriptions to verify that the account is for a politician or is affiliated with one. We also relied on popular accounts of government institutions, political parties pages and accounts, newspapers, and television stations and looked through their follower/friends lists to identify our accounts. Due to the restrictive nature of the subjects, we only selected according to gender irrespective of the age of the individual, party affiliation, or geographical location; however,



data on these features was also obtained for further analysis of the association between variables. In some instances, multiple accounts or pages under a politician's name were also considered so as to be able to attain all replies and comments to that individual. However, when evaluating social media usage personal accounts or pages will be considered as opposed to candidate social media groups that have different user accounts posting about a candidate.

### Quantitative Data Collection

A total of 268 accounts were identified for quantitative data collection and were equally divided across women and men candidates and across social media platforms Twitter and Facebook. These accounts were mainly used to understand the response toward candidates and comments/replies on their existing posts were collected. Additionally, tweets and replies/posts from these accounts were also collected to monitor usage patterns. Data on Twitter was obtained through Twitter's Application Programming Interface while that on Facebook was manually obtained using a web scraping tool Instant Data Scraper. For data analysis purposes, a variable age was introduced and researchers used online platforms such as social media platforms, websites, and blogs to identify candidates' ages and age groups were generated for better analysis results. Additionally, an election outcome variable was introduced in the same manner.



## Lexicon Development Approach

Researchers employed a lexicon approach to analyzing sentiment where a group of local experts developed lexicons on gendered hate speech and the political language of the moment which were then evaluated against comments and social media posts to examine the online violence experienced by politically active women. This lexicon was generated during a physical workshop on 5 October 2022 in Nairobi, Kenya. Workshop participants were drawn from different local women's rights organisations and local leaders. The lexicon generated covered commonly used words and phrases in both English and Kiswahili.

Researchers employed a similar typology method as used in previous studies Kakande et al., 2021 and NDI, 2019.

*The following categories were identified from the data:*

<b>VAW-P TYPOLOGY</b>	<b>ONLINE VAW-P TYPOLOGY</b>	<b>HOW WE CONCEPTUALIZED IT</b>
Psychological Sexual Psychological / Threats & Coercion / Economic	Insults and hate speech. Sexualized distortion. Embarrassment and reputation risk.	Insults and Hate speech. Sexual violence. Body shaming, Disinformation, Trolling.

# findings

## Findings from the Qualitative research

A total of twenty-nine elected women politicians in Kenya; thirteen(13) elected women politicians in Kenya in individual in-depth interviews while sixteen (16) other women responded to open-ended questions sent to them via a Google form.

### Digital platforms use

All respondents that took part in the research (n =29) used platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Google Email, Zoom, and Outlook to support their political campaigns. This reflects the higher internet penetration rate in Kenya, which stands at 42% of the entire population as of January 2022. A majority (n=28) used Facebook as an online community that offered a plethora of engaging the electorate. A woman politician we spoke to said most of their constituents use Facebook because it enables users to interact freely with important political figures, topics, groups, and ultimately other users. Facebook as a platform is also known to cater to a wide variety of people, incorporating many different media aspects, from photos to messenger to text. It is not as limited as LinkedIn and Twitter, which typically cater to a specific demographic (Laganas, Caroline; McLeod, Kendall; and Lowe, Elizabeth, 2017).

### OVAW-P takes different forms but with similar drivers

Harassment primarily occurs on locally-led WhatsApp and Facebook groups, with a smaller number (n = 2) mentioning TikTok comments and videos as a source.



Only two of 29 respondents noted that they had not been the target of OVAW-P. Anonymous trolls, hackers, or online users resort to indecent and disrespectful conduct to intimidate, harass and threaten women politicians online before, during, and after their campaigns. Women that took part in the interviews mentioned that trolls do not care to comment on women's proposed political agendas, manifestos or educational and professional backgrounds but rather choose to fixate on their bodies and sexual as well as personal lives.

Twenty-seven respondents mentioned various online attacks, from online bullying, such as insults and name-calling, threats against their campaign and personal lives as well as families, negative criticism, and harassment from their own political parties. Some went as far as spreading fake news, such as rumors of corruption or infidelity, online to undermine a woman's campaign. Others mentioned incorrect information that was spread about them and their families:

***“Actually they would attack right from your political office, your family, some things they will say may be true but most of them completely incorrect and there is a lot of social media propaganda spreading.”***

According to women politicians, in many instances of blackmail, extortion, and sextortion, perpetrators used fake photos they circulated on social media accounts. Interviewed women politicians in the research study mentioned one example where a fabricated story about a woman contesting for a political position circulated on Facebook that she was caught by her spouse with another man in a hotel and the spouse pulled a pistol on the said man. The woman was traumatized, she deactivated her Facebook account.

The key drivers of OVAW-P are cultures, traditions, and customs that inhibit the capacity of women to ascend to political office. As a result, there is a tendency towards gender stereotyping in politics which often in most cases may have deleterious outcomes for women. OVAW-P often intersects with other demographic factors of women in politics, such as age, party affiliation, or election outcome. One respondent noted that ***“she was a widow, not from a particular tribe, and referred to as an outsider.”***

Party affiliation also puts women at risk from other political parties to harassment and a barrage of insults. Age is another factor; women are seen as immature when they are younger. Many people believe politicians should be at least forty years of age. If a younger woman runs, she is seen as using her sexuality to climb the political ladder. Younger women politicians we spoke to said they received comments on their social media like **“You are joining prostitution, women in politics are seen as prostitutes”**. Older women are castigated as irrelevant and not knowledgeable of current politics. A more general comment for all women politicians was that politics is not their space, it is for men, and for them to succeed in the space they need to cut sex deals with men. The political arena is seen as a de facto space in which women play very peripheral and insignificant roles and so women who aspire for political office are considered to be **“prostitutes, wild and unruly”**. This sexist slandering has not been used to describe just Kenyan women elected in 2022, it has been used systematically to denigrate women who aspire for any political positions.

### Responding to OVAW-P

OVAW-P has a characteristic of spreading virally across geographical locations. This virality is amplified by media channels that in most cases as they cover the story make the woman look bad. Women politicians are in most cases short of ways of responding to OVAW-P. They are left to deleting and deactivating their social media accounts, taking leave from digital platforms for some time.

Women respondents did mention that they in most cases do not get to know the perpetrators. Four out of 29 respondents were able to discover who the perpetrators were and had them arrested and jailed but the cases were never followed up. Only 3 out of 29 women we spoke to had participated in digital safety and security training where they are skilled in the use of strong passwords, and 2FA. The other twenty-six (26) had never received any digital safety training.



## **OVAW-P threatens women's physical safety and mental well-being**

Of women respondents who said they experienced online harassment, ten women reported that some or all of it moved offline. They were subjected to physical violence after online incidences were known by family members. A case was narrated of a woman politician whose photoshopped pictures circulated on social media having sexual encounters with another man. Her husband was upset by the posts, beat her, and divorced her but she also lost her seat in her constituency. Another woman politician also had personal intimate pictures of her circulating on Facebook and WhatsApp groups, experienced public ridicule, and lost the parliamentary seat she was contesting for. Violence offline targeting women comprises an important subset of the threats that women, especially those in politics, may face as it is the most deadly.

Seven out of the 29 women mentioned curbing the use of social media during campaigns especially to notify their constituents of the places where they would be going to hold campaigns. This was because they would be attacked physically, as one woman respondent narrated how she was way-laid and her driver shot in the hand. Those who try to post do not give the details of the meeting's exact venue, and time. This has a significant effect on the voter turn-up for campaigning as well as negative electoral outcomes for the woman candidate.

Loss of self-esteem and tarnished reputation for women politicians was mentioned by all the women respondents. Women said that not only do the negative comments about them make them lose their self-esteem but also they are a key driver of their withdrawal from online political discourse and discourage other women from joining public and political life.

OVAW-P limits women's political opportunities and discourages or prevents them from exercising their political rights as candidates. Online harassment of women actively campaigning for their election results in reduced morale, self-esteem issues, and an overall detriment to their mental health. Reputations are ruined, and the repercussions follow women, their families, and political parties across their careers. Sexual harassment may cause anxiety and depression, withdrawal, and other issues.



## Findings from the Quantitative Research

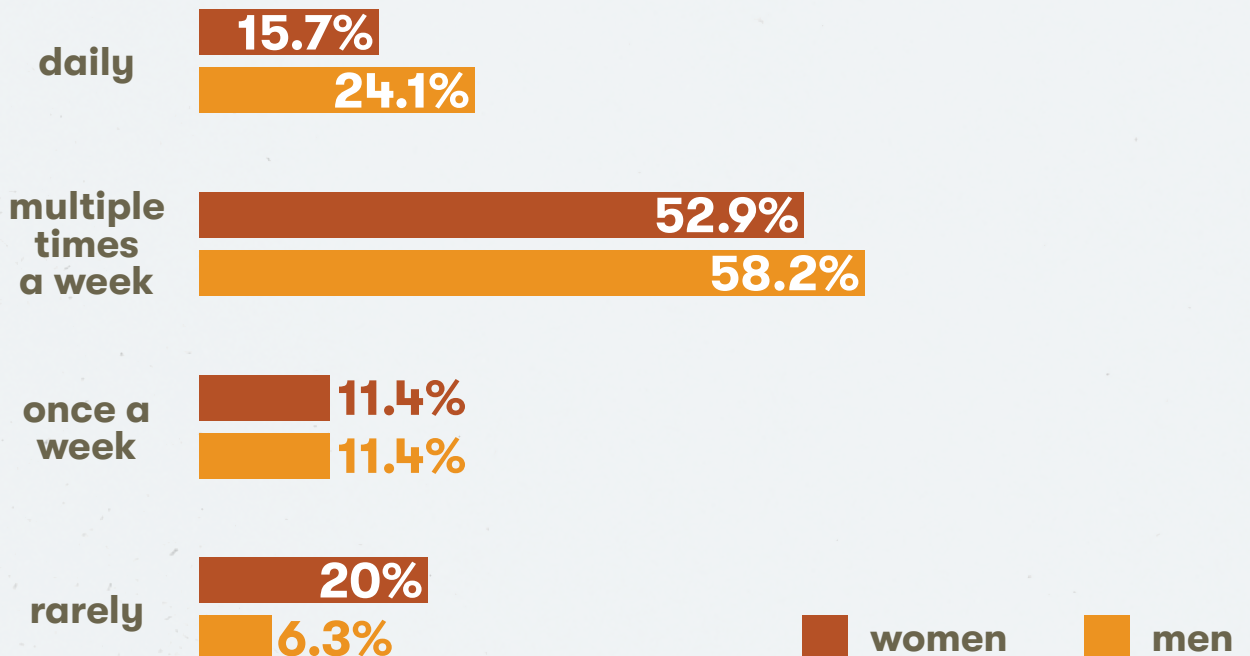
We monitored 268 accounts were monitored across Facebook and Twitter belonging to both women and men candidates involved in the 2022 Kenya general elections, below are the findings from the collected data.

### Facebook

How do women politicians in Kenya use Facebook for campaigning during the election period? How does the use of Facebook differ among men and women candidates?

Facebook usage was generally higher across the men candidates with 93.8 percent of the accounts belonging to the men candidates being used at least once a week compared to the women candidates at 80 percent.

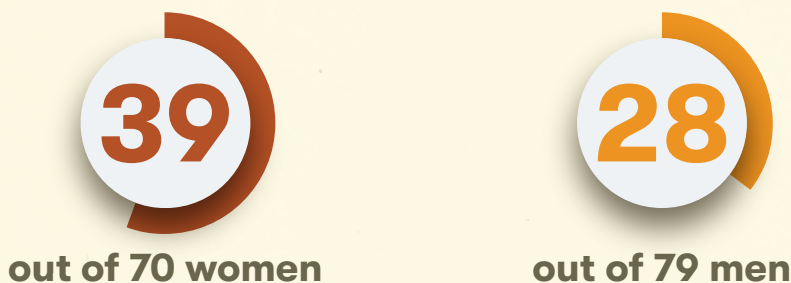
*Facebook Usage frequency by Women and Men candidates during the monitoring period.*



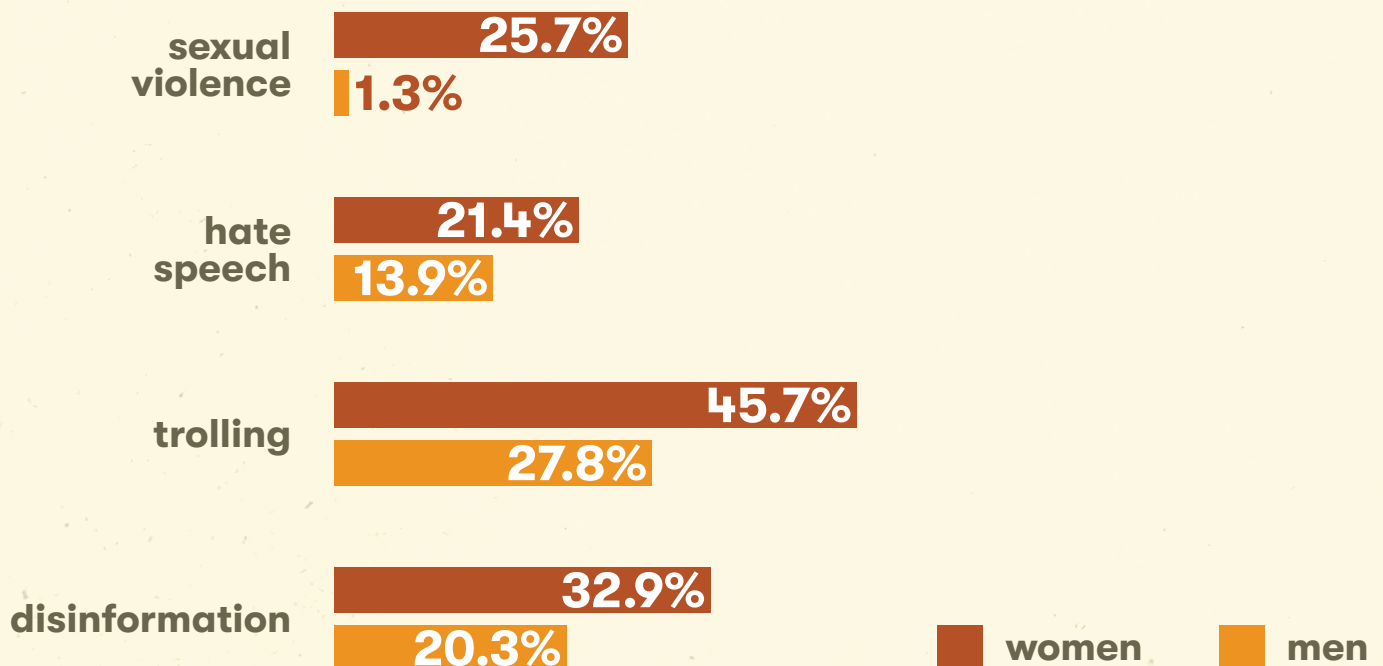
## What evidence of OVAW-P exists on Facebook and how does it manifest?

OVAW-P was more prevalent among women candidates on Facebook with at least one in two of the women's accounts monitored (55.7 percent) experiencing some form of OVAWP compared to 35.4 percent among the men candidates. Additionally, each of the forms of violence observed was more prevalent towards those women candidates, especially sexual violence which was predominantly experienced by women candidates.

*Number of Monitored Facebook accounts receiving at least one form of OVAWP*



*Distribution of Women and Men's Facebook Accounts Experiencing a Specific Form of OVAWP*



What is the association between OVAW-P and factors such as their age, frequency of social media use, and electoral results on Facebook?

### Association between Age and Online Violence against Women Politicians

The tables below show the distribution of types of online violence in comparison to the age of the individuals attributed to the social media accounts that were monitored. According to the data, sexual violence increased with an increase in age. While the two forms of violence insult and hate speech and trolling were more associated with younger women age groups.

*Percentage of women candidates on Facebook experiencing:*

#### insult and hate speech



#### sexual harassment



#### trolling

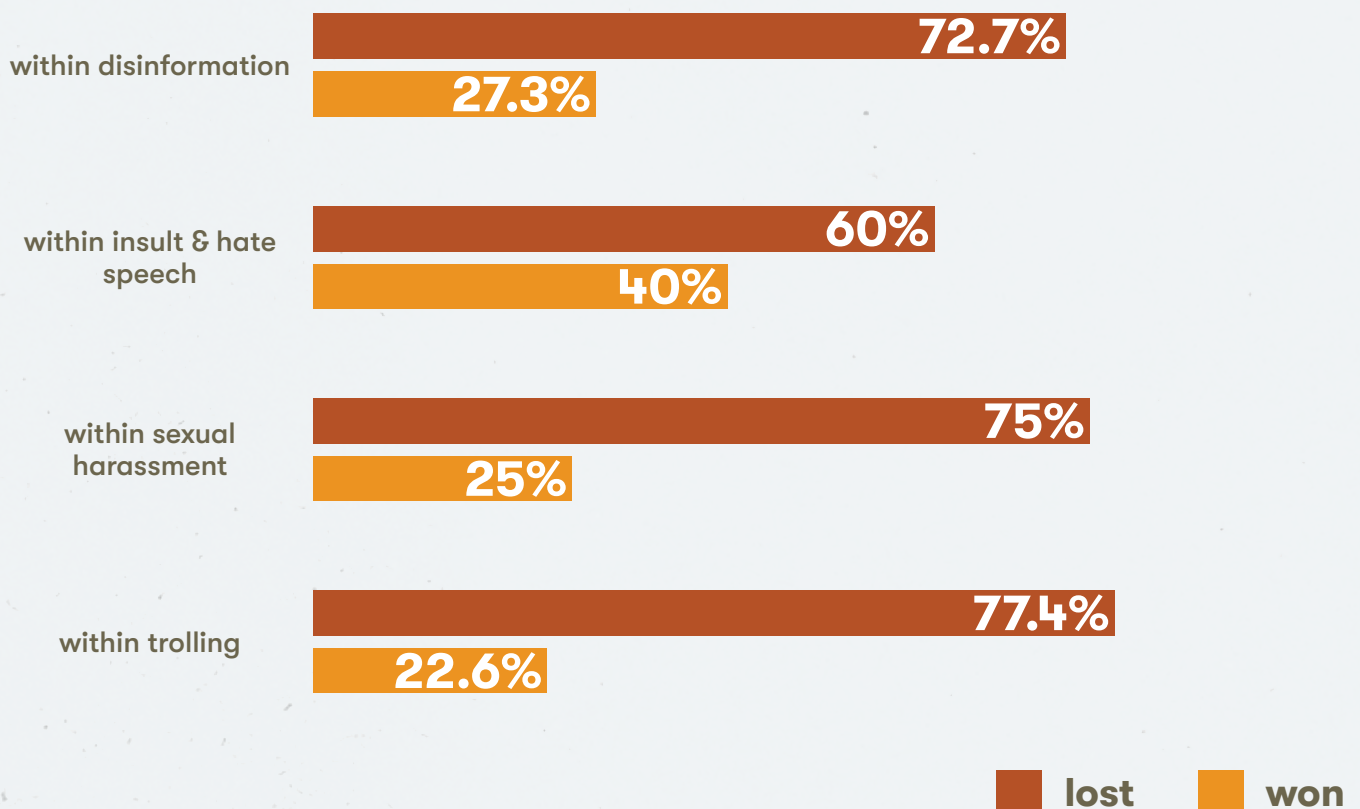




## Association between Age and Online Violence against Women Politicians

The table below shows the distribution of types of online violence in comparison to the age of the individuals attributed to the social media accounts that were monitored. According to the data, online violence was predominantly associated with the losing candidates, and 72.7 percent of the women who lost the election experienced disinformation and 60 percent of the women who lost the election experienced insults and hate speech, and 75% of the women who lost the election experienced sexual harassment and 77.4 percent of the women who lost the election experienced trolling.

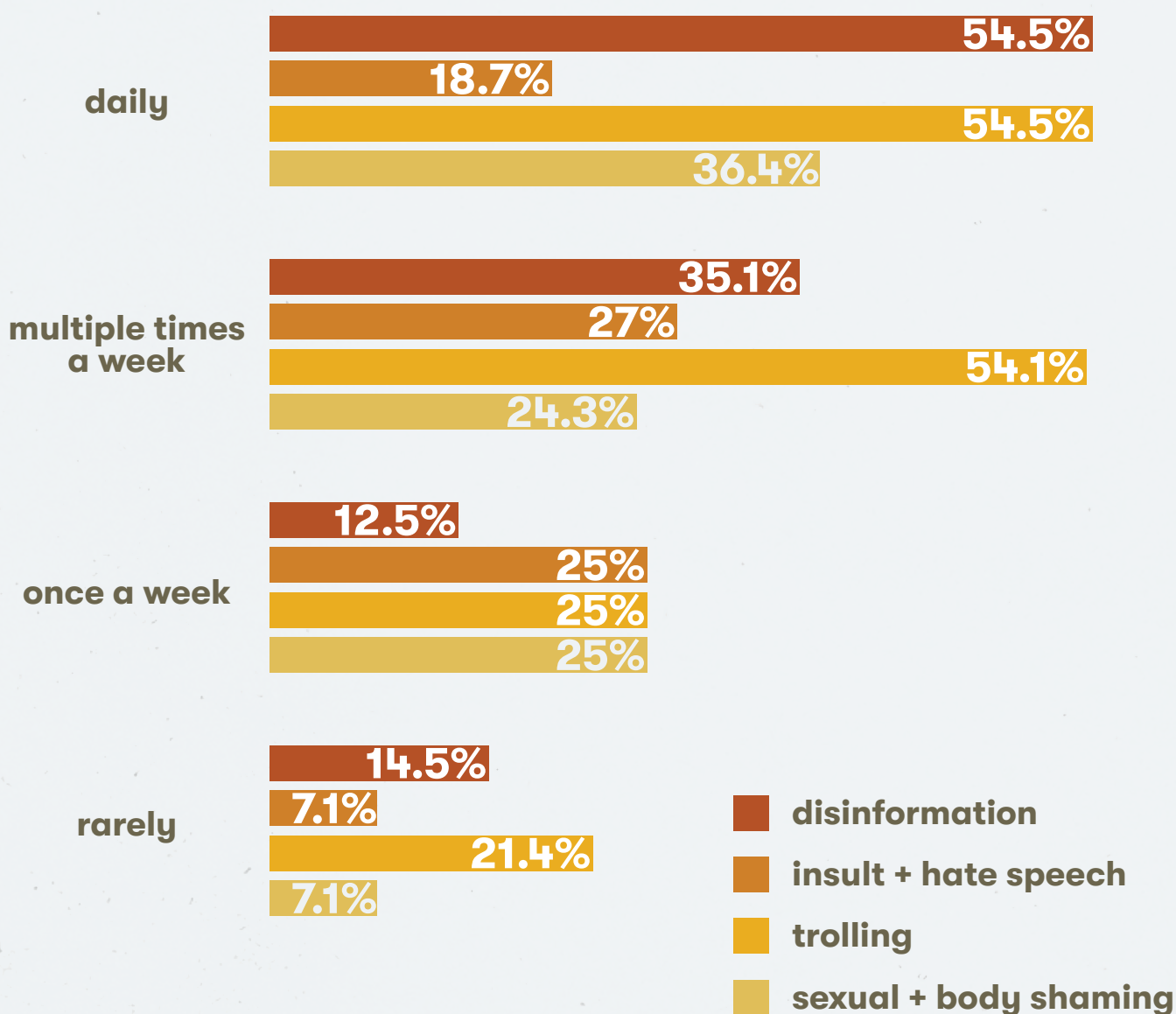
*Percentage of women candidates on Facebook experiencing online violence grouped by the election outcome*



## Association between frequency of social media use and online violence against women politicians

In terms of social media frequency of use, higher usage of social media platforms resulted in higher levels of online violence.

*Percentage of women candidates experiencing a specific form of OVAWP grouped by their usage frequency on Facebook*

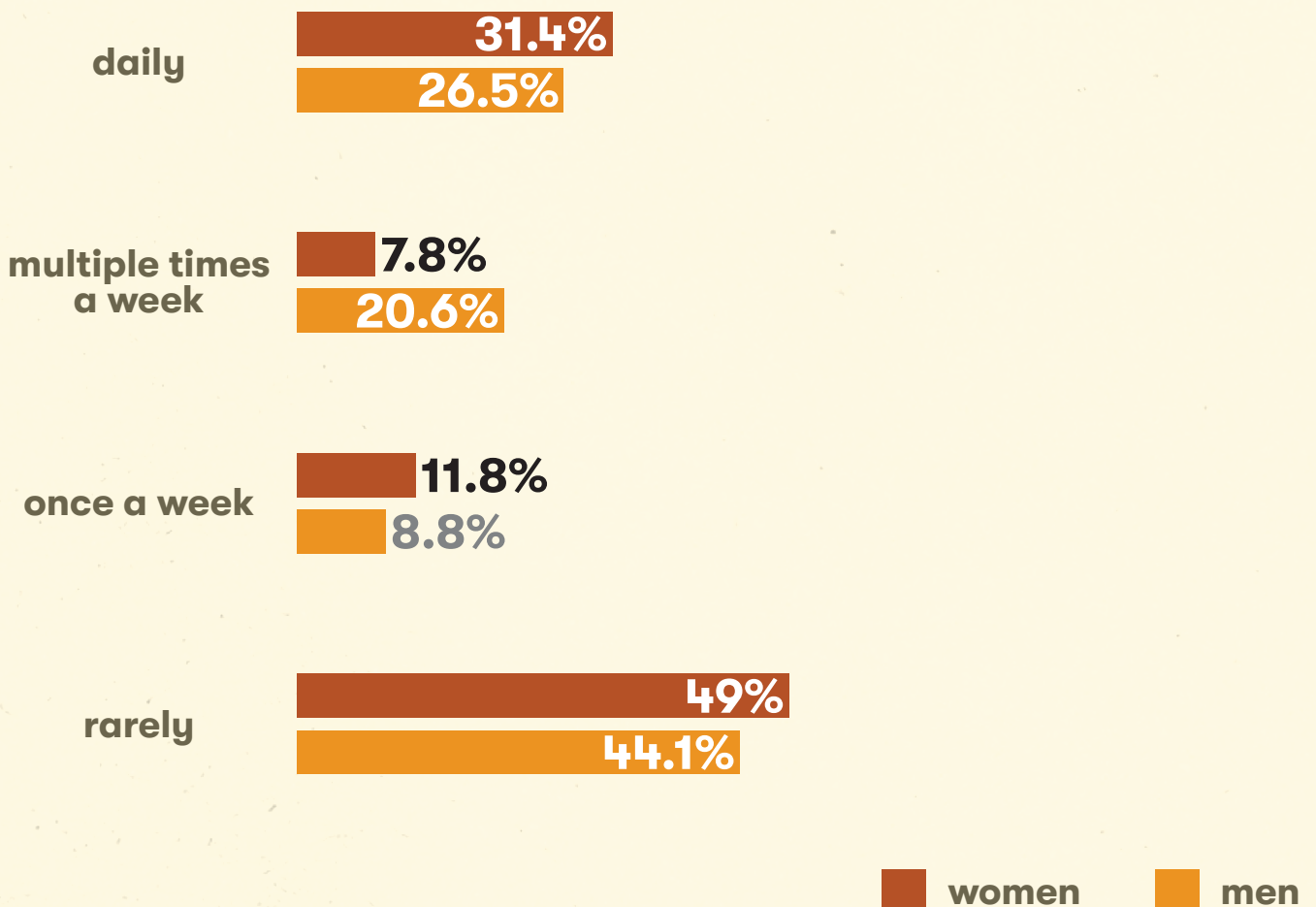


## Twitter

How do women politicians in Kenya use Twitter for campaigning during the election period?  
How does the use of Twitter differ among men and women candidates?

On Twitter, 51 percent of the women candidates used their account at least once a week compared to their male counterparts at 56 percent.

*Twitter usage by women and men nominated candidates during the monitoring period*

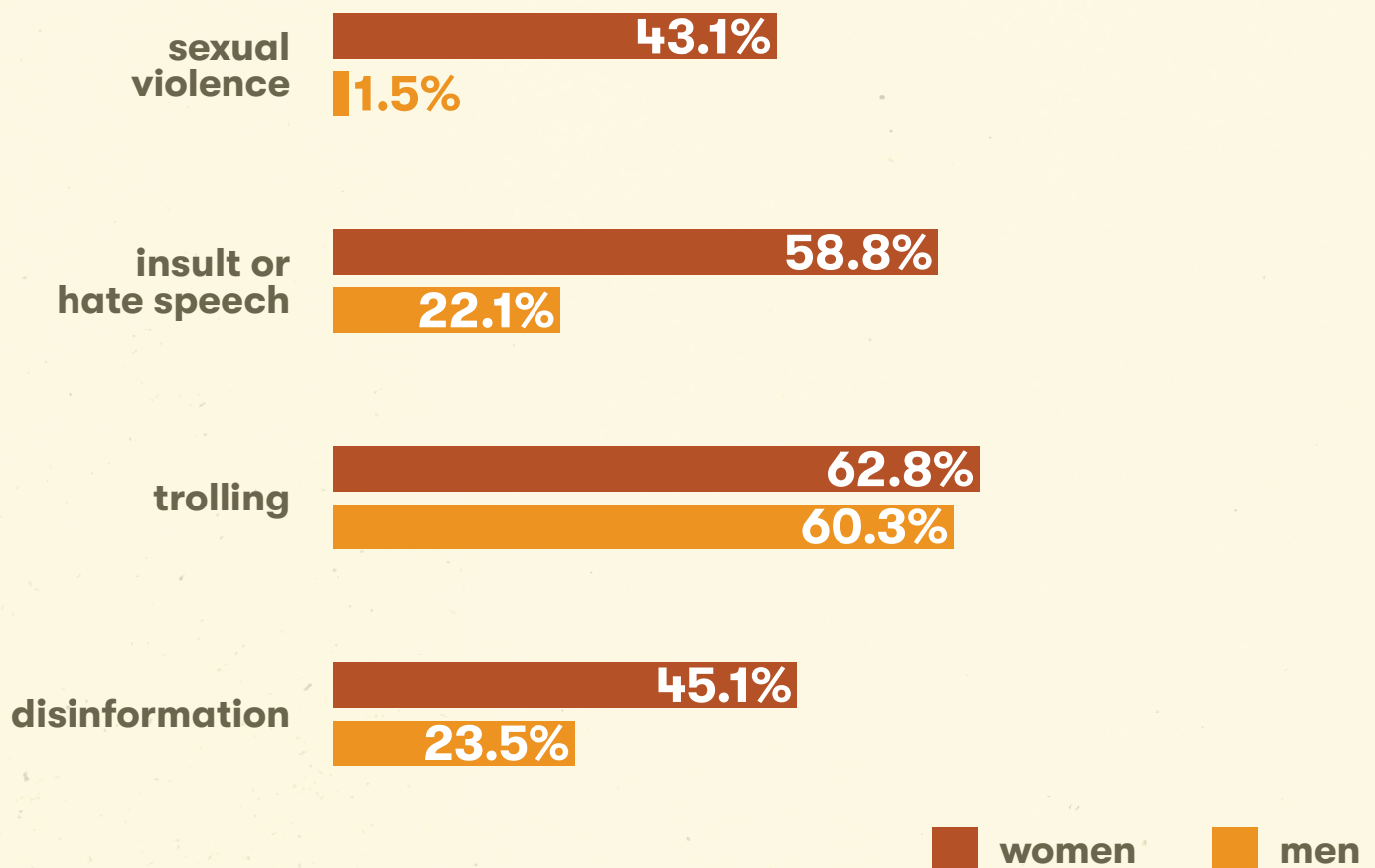




## What evidence of OVAW-P exists on Twitter and how does it manifest?

Online violence disproportionately affects women, with significantly higher percentages of women experiencing sexual harassment, hate speech, and disinformation compared to men. However, both women and men reported similarly high levels of exposure to trolling. 43.1 percent of the accounts belonging to women experienced sexualized violence, 58.8 percent experienced insult or hate speech, 62.8 percent experienced trolling, and 45.1 percent had disinformation content.

*Percentage of candidates experiencing a specific form of OVAWP on Twitter during the monitoring period*

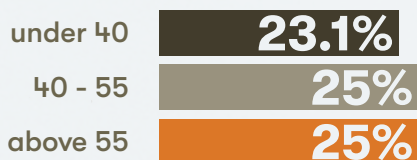


What is the association between OVAW-P and factors such as their age, frequency of social media use, electoral results and other factors?

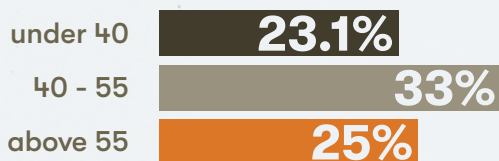
In contrast to Facebook, women in the 40 to 55 age group recorded higher numbers of online violence compared to their counterparts in the age groups below 40 and above 55.

*Percentage of women candidates on Twitter experiencing a specific form of online violence grouped by their age*

### sexual violence



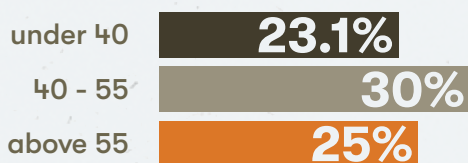
### insult or hate speech



### trolling



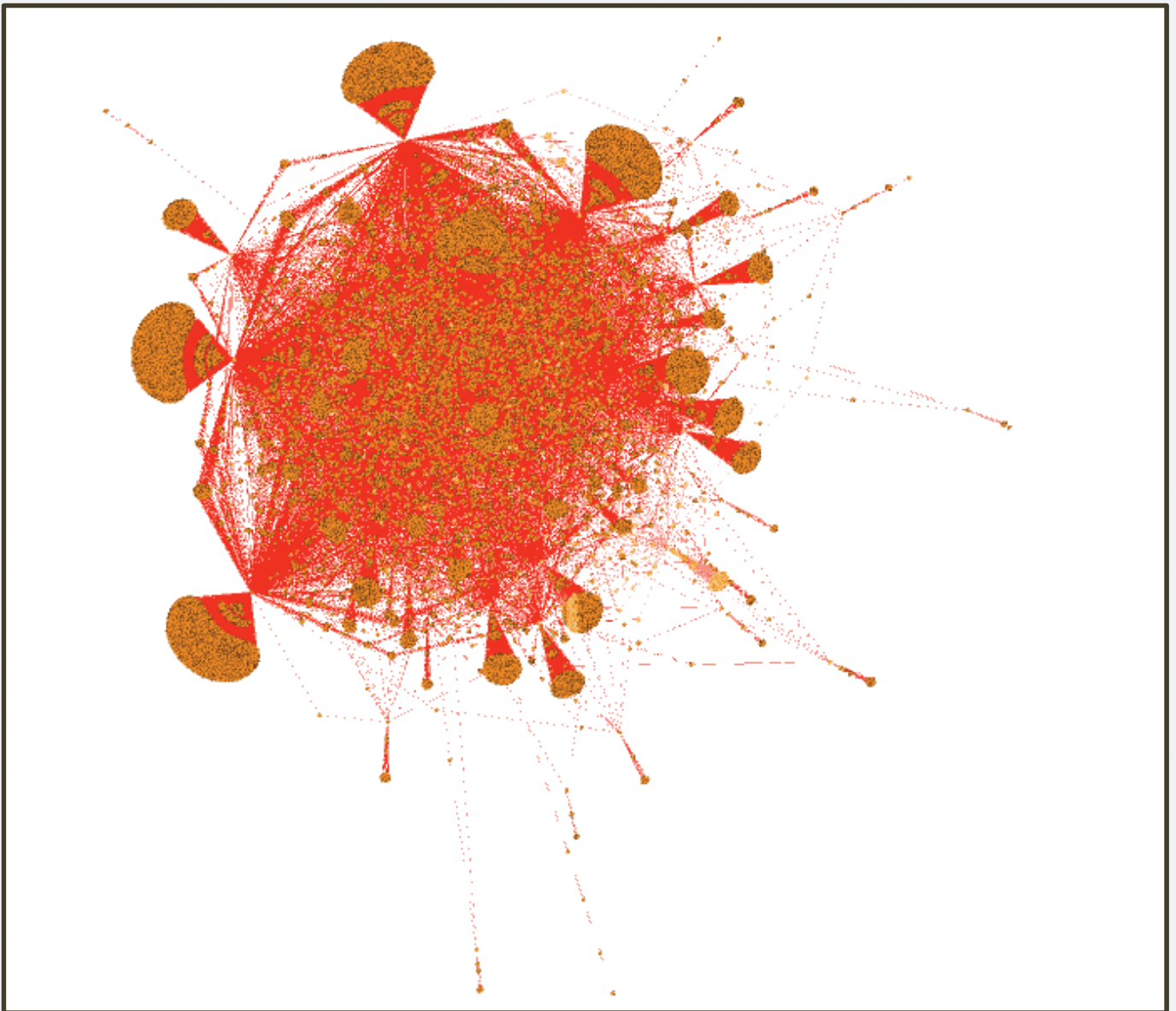
### disinformation



*There was no visible association between online violence and the election outcome of the candidates on Twitter as observed on Facebook.*

## Evaluating the reply network of women leaders and the accounts replying to their tweets

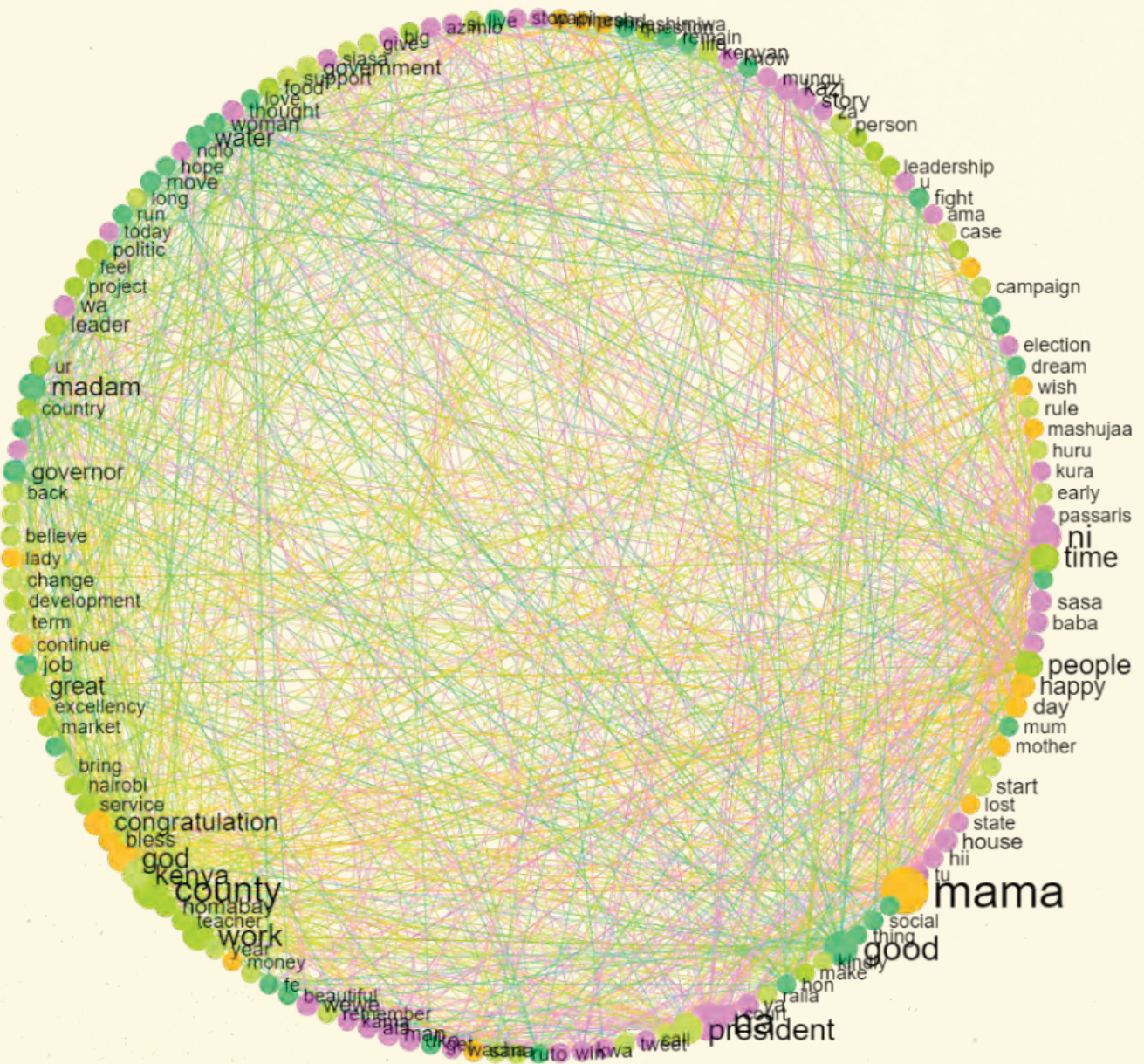
Using network analysis, the accounts posting comments or replies to each candidate were mapped out. The diagram shows the presence of large cones indicating some women leaders' accounts had a concentrated number of accounts leaving negative comments on just their social media accounts. This can be an indication of targeted attacks towards specific women with the size of the cone indicating the number of accounts targeting a specific candidate. In this diagram four (4) women specifically received a large number of replies compared to other accounts. The large size of the cones evidences this.





## Evaluating the nature of discourse observed in the Twitter replies to women candidates

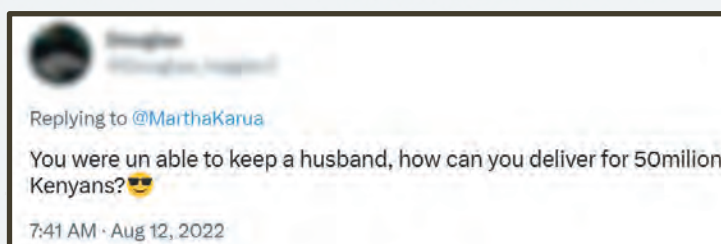
Using word networks, we mapped out networks of words being used in replies to tweets by women candidates to understand the underlying themes and topics they portray. The diagram below shows that the discourse was mostly centered around the presidential election with keywords such as “president”, “raila”, “ruto” showing up in the replies. We can also see the genderized keywords such as “lady”, “madam”, “mum”, “mother”, “mama”, “girl”, and “woman”.



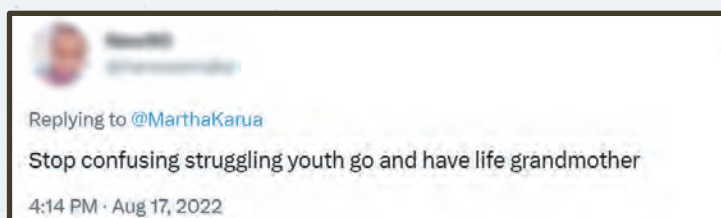




Anne Waiguru: was accused of abuse of office with an overarching theme of corruption in her comments over the National Youth Service saga. Keywords used in the theme can be observed in the top northeast corner of the network graph with words like “corruption”, “money”, “stole”, “billions” “scandal” etc.



Martha Karua: was also another greatly targeted account with personalized comments about her physical appearance, her age, and her marital status with words such as “old”, “husband”, etc.





# discussion & conclusions

Online violence continues to be a major threat. OVAW-P may take many other forms, including sexist stereotypes and images portrayed in the media, which, particularly in the digital age, focus on women's bodies, sexuality, and traditional social roles, rather than their competence, capacity, and contributions as leaders. The aim of OVAW-P is to discourage women from political participation and thus deny them their political rights (Laganas, Caroline; McLeod, Kendall; and Lowe, Elizabeth, 2017).

For women in politics, OVAW-P contravenes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Article 7 of CEDAW clearly identifies that countries should ensure that women have the right to be eligible for election to all publicly elected offices, hold public office, and perform all public functions so as to promote inclusive democracy (Gabrielle Bardall, Elin Bajarnegard and Jennifer M Piscopo, 2019). Hence denying women in politics these opportunities as a result of OVAW-P will be alienating them from the aforementioned rights. Regardless of what perpetrators use OVAW-P to accomplish—for example, manipulating election outcomes or fighting to frustrate women's democratic participation, the attacks themselves remain intentionally disruptive.

Networked harassment, where online boards and social media sites have been created for people to gather and organize harassment campaigns against individuals or specific groups of people, was prevalent in the 2022 general elections in Kenya. During the campaign period, there were concerted efforts to bully and harass women candidates online (Krippahl, 2022). Even the highest contenders, like Martha Karua, the NARC Kenya party leader, were not spared. Online bullies used her marital status to discredit her candidature, and she was profiled as a grandmother who should be home taking care of her grandchildren (Elfverson and Höglund, 2022).

The impact of online abuse is felt at an individual and systemic level. Individually, there is psychological harm, fear for safety, and reputational and professional damage. On a systemic level, online violence reinforces inequality and maintains discriminatory norms limiting women's online freedom of expression. Sexual harassment may cause anxiety and depression and result in withdrawal and other issues. OVAW-P may negatively affect voter turnout for political rallies and voting, leading to women losing their races and preventing higher numbers of women in political positions (Al Atri and DeSoi, 2023). Social media platforms are often slow or unable to respond to complaints or take down offensive posts. Authorities do not take women's complaints seriously, deepening a belief in Kenya that online violence is not as "serious" as physical violence. However, when it comes to responding to this issue, more programming is needed.

There have been some legal reforms in response to OVAW-P; however, countries like Kenya often struggle to keep up with the gender dimensions of OVAW-P which is often still viewed as a generic cybercrime. This tendency obscures gender drivers and the fact that women and girls are the primary victims. Law enforcement agencies and courts appear to be failing to take appropriate corrective actions to address OVAW-P. They are not necessarily equipped enough to deal with cases of OVAW-P and provide the required support to survivors. Women we spoke to said government policies and the police response to OVAW-P were inadequate. Legal systems have also not yet caught up to issues that are common in online VAW, such as secondary perpetration where bystanders download, forward, and share content that is violent and is shared without the subject's consent. Often, women are blamed and withdraw from digital spaces, which deprives them of access to justice in addition to the loss of many opportunities from being online.



# recommendations

As the Kenya Kwanza government embarks on digitising over 5000 government services this 2023, it leaves room to explore the room for digital literacy, legal policies and frameworks that promote proper platform use and protects women from online abuse. For Kenya women politicians to gain more traction using digital platforms, the time is now to promote their participation online by revising the Electoral Code of Conduct, the Political Parties Act 2011 and the Political Parties Disputes Tribunal. Specifically, the Tribunal's mandate has to expand to hear disputes arising from online use. In the Political Parties Act and its Code of Conduct, the definition of online violence must be included and clearly outline the recourse and applicable measures.

The education curriculum must address safe online engagement as much as it addresses different forms of social protection for Kenyans since online violence has roots in the offline world.

Women running for political office should receive substantial support through digital safety training. Additionally, more state and non-state actors need to prioritize monitoring and addressing OVAW-P in future election cycles. The authorities need to ensure that legal frameworks recognise online harassment and that law enforcers and public prosecutors are trained to deal with cases of online harassment.

It is also important that women file cases of online harassment with the authorities to enable prosecution. Respondents noted that only a handful of organizations, such as UN Women, FIDA Kenya and KEWOPA, addressed the issue. Specifically, as KEWOPA continues to champion for the protection of women from online abuse, the women parliamentarians must actively be engaged



in the data governance reforms and amendment of the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018 to tighten any loose ends in terms of prosecution and conviction. For example, the Directorate of Criminal Investigations had promised to set up a department to crack down on OVAW-P, but nothing came of it. A dedicated consortium or response team would be invaluable to broadening the discussion around gender-based violence, particularly in online spaces.

It is also important that women organizations and civil society organizations work hand in hand to lobby to have legislation enacted to protect women from online violence, sensitize the media to provide balanced reporting on women in politics and acts of OVAW-P committed on them, and provide success stories of women in political leadership who have conquered OVAW-P to increase awareness of the problem of OVAW-P.

Finally, there is a global and regional call for governments, internet intermediate companies, CSOs and relevant stakeholders to use a multistakeholder approach that ensures adequate laws, policies, practices, and training are in place to prevent and end online violence and abuse against women. However, it is critical to have restrictions or penalties that are focused on online violence against women while not impinging upon the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression. Tackling online violence against women must not be used as an excuse to reduce the enjoyment of freedom of expression.

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# appendices

## Lexicon building workshop in Kenya



Images showing participants in the Lexicon Building Workshop hosted by CREAM-Kenya and Pollicy in 2022, Nairobi, Kenya. More words classified during the Kenya election and campaign period by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) can be found [here](#).