



Summary:

Women in leadership positions encounter various obstacles in their political careers, including lower literacy rates, intimidation from within their families or communities, financial constraints during campaigns, and a lack of emphasis on gender equality in leadership. This report brief offers compelling evidence of the impact of patriarchal, cultural, and traditional norms on women's political leadership, shedding light on the challenges they face.

Background:

During the 2022 Kenya election, women politicians in Kenya encountered a distressing level of violence, harassment, intimidation, and backlash during their campaigns and support for candidates. Examples include Martha Karua facing insulting statements as a running mate, Wavinya Ndeti being targeted for marrying outside her ethnicity, Mary Mugure receiving threatening messages and physical intimidation, and Susan Kihika being bullied for her divorce. These cases reflect a larger pattern of attempts to discourage women from participating in politics through both online and offline means.

To further investigate this online violence against women in politics (OVAWP), our study identified and monitored 268 social media accounts (on Facebook and Twitter) belonging to women and men candidates during Kenya's 2022 general elections. We employed various methodologies such as lexicon building, focus group discussions, data scraping, qualitative data analysis, and machine learning techniques. We also interviewed 29 women leaders in Kenya to supplement the data collected from the social media platforms. Our goal was to understand the impact of online harassment on women's use of social media platforms for political activities during the elections.

Key findings

Use of platforms

Facebook usage was generally higher across the men candidates with 93.8 percent of the accounts belonging to the men candidates

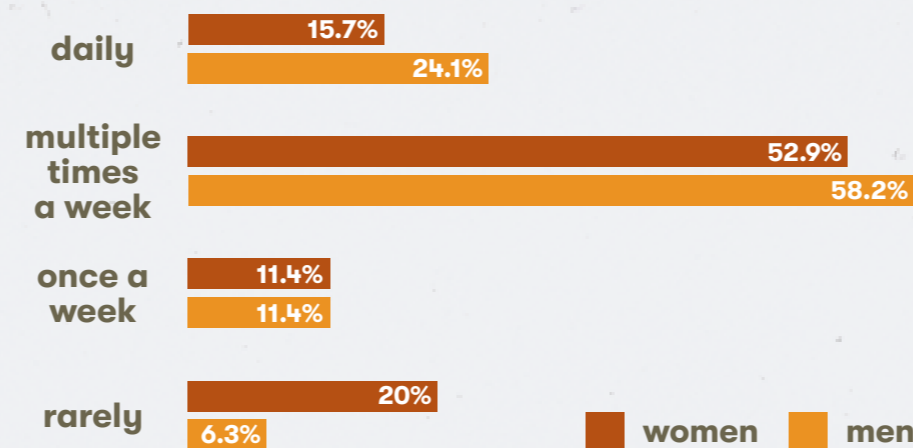
Byte Bullies

A Report on Online Violence Against Women in the 2022 Kenya General Elections

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

being used at least once a week compared to the women candidates at 80 percent. On Twitter, 51 percent of the women candidates used their account at least once a week compared to their male counterparts at 56 percent.

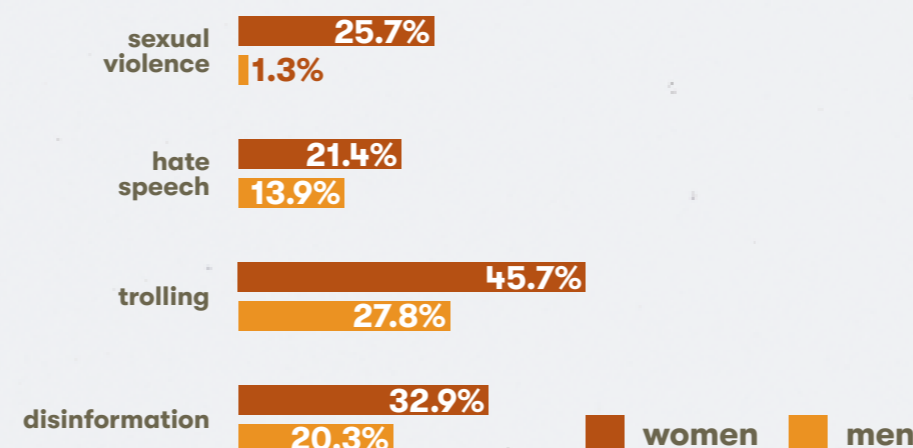
Facebook Usage frequency by Women and Men candidates during the monitoring period.



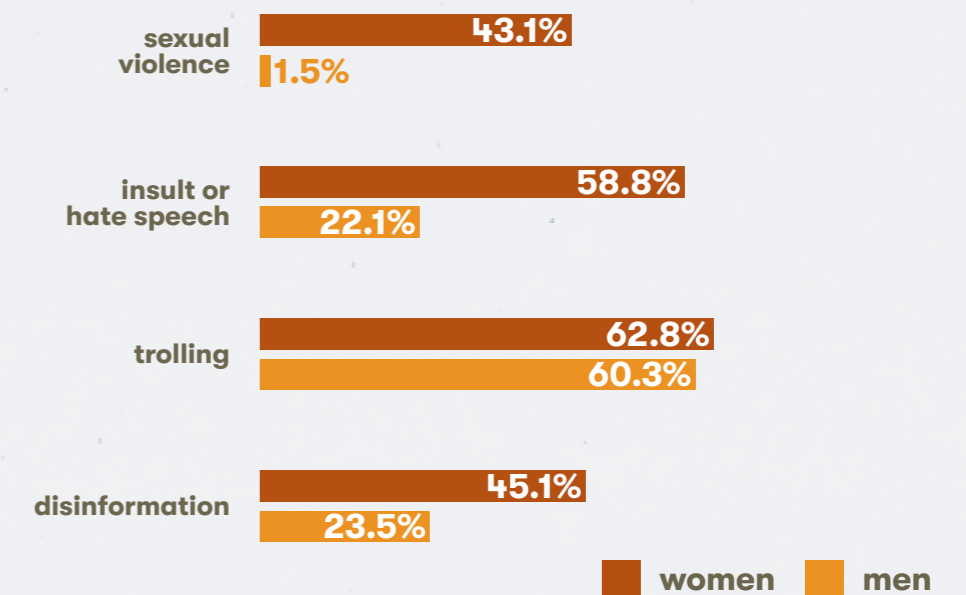
Manifestations of OVAW-P

Our findings revealed a higher prevalence of online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P) on Facebook, with 55.7% of women candidates experiencing some form of OVAW-P, compared to 35.4% among men candidates. Sexual violence emerged as the most predominant form of violence directed toward women candidates. On Twitter, women were disproportionately affected, experiencing higher percentages of sexual harassment, hate speech, and disinformation compared to men. These results highlight the alarming gender disparities in online violence and emphasize the urgent need for addressing and combating this issue.

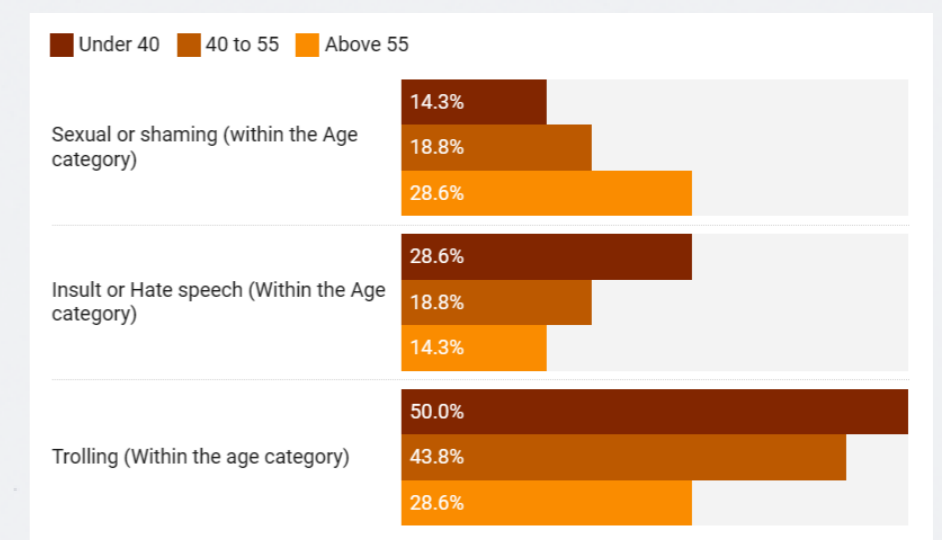
Distribution of Women and Men's Facebook Accounts Experiencing a Specific Form of OVAWP



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



According to the data, sexual violence on Facebook 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 and percentages decreased with each older age group.



The data also revealed that online violence was predominantly linked to losing candidates. Among women who lost the election, 72.7% experienced disinformation, 60% faced insults and hate speech, 75% encountered sexual harassment, and 77.4% dealt with trolling.

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Facebook usage frequency	Daily	Multiple times a week	Once a week	Rarely
Disinformation	55	35	13	15
Insult + Hate speech	19	27	25	7
Trolling	55	54	25	21
Sexual + Body shaming	36	24	25	7

Network analysis was conducted to visualize the accounts engaging with women leaders' social media accounts through comments and replies. The diagram revealed the presence of concentrated clusters, represented by large cones, indicating targeted attacks towards specific women. The size of the cones indicated the number of accounts targeting each candidate. Specifically, four women leaders received a significantly higher number of replies compared to other accounts, as evidenced by the large size of the cones. This highlights the existence of targeted and concentrated negative engagement toward these women on social media platforms.

Upon analyzing the keyword network of sexual comments, several themes emerged. These included attacks on women's appearance, discouragement, and disinformation. Negative comments targeting women's appearance contained keywords like "old" and "ass," while discouraging comments used words such as "pathetic" and "nonsense." Disinformation themes included words like "corruption," "money," and "billions." Two women candidates, Anne Waiguru and Martha Karua, were identified as being particularly targeted in the data analysis.

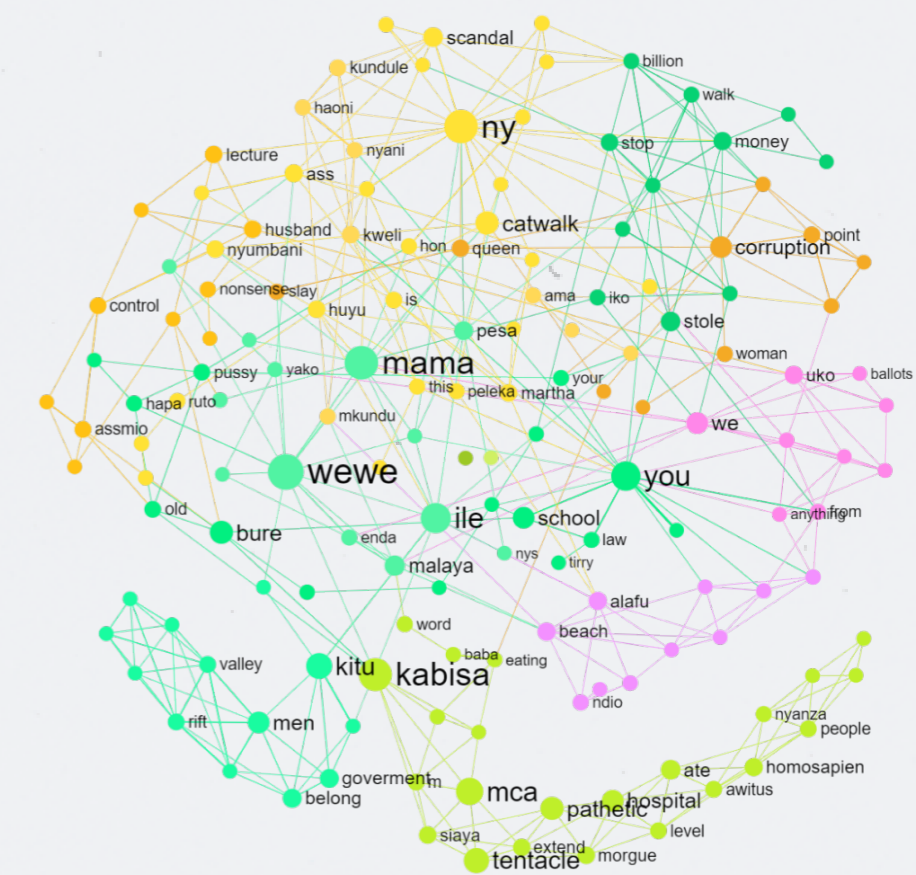
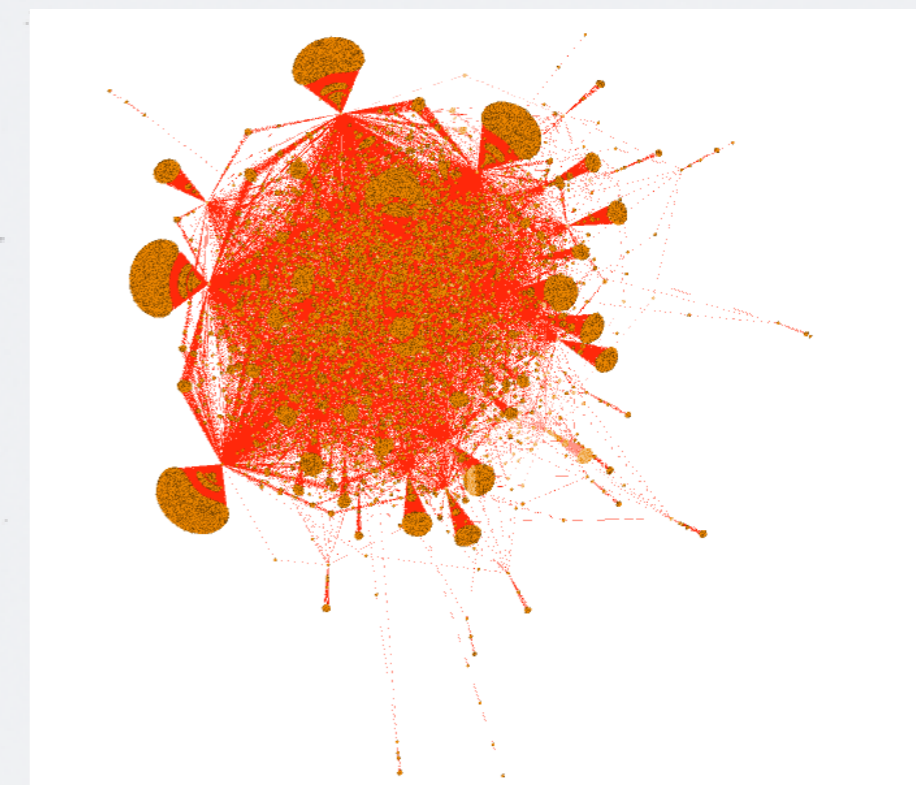
Other Findings:

- Harassment primarily occurs on locally-led WhatsApp and Facebook groups, with a smaller number mentioning TikTok as a source.
- Trolls resort to indecent and disrespectful conduct to intimidate, harass, and threaten women politicians online.
- Attacks on women's appearance, personal lives, and sexualization are prevalent, while their political agendas are often ignored.
- Online attacks include insults, threats, negative criticism, and the spreading of fake news to undermine women's campaigns.
- OVAW-P is driven by cultural barriers, gender stereotypes, ageism, party affiliation, and election outcomes.
- Women politicians often lack effective ways to respond to OVAW-P, resorting to deactivating their accounts or taking breaks from social media.
- Reporting incidents of violence is often met with dismissal, victim-blaming, and the spreading of misinformation.
- OVAW-P leads to loss of self-esteem, tarnished reputation, reduced morale, and mental health issues for women politicians.
- Online harassment limits women's political opportunities and discourages their political engagement.

Recommendations;

We identified a number of recommendations;

1. To facilitate the successful digitization of government services in Kenya, it is crucial to prioritize digital literacy, legal policies, and frameworks that protect women from online abuse.
2. Enhancing the participation of women politicians on digital platforms requires the revision of the Electoral Code of Conduct, the Political Parties Act 2011, and the Political Parties Disputes Tribunal to address online disputes.
3. The Kenyan education curriculum should incorporate safe online engagement alongside other forms of social protection. Women running for political office should receive comprehensive digital safety training.
4. State and non-state actors should actively monitor and address online violence against women in future election cycles.
5. Legal frameworks need to acknowledge online harassment, and law enforcement officials should receive training to effectively handle such cases.



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