

The Cost of Candidacy

Cyclical Online Gendered Violence across Elections
in Tanzania & Côte d'Ivoire



POLLCY

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CAP-CI	Coalition for Peaceful Alternation (Coalition pour l'Alternance Pacifique de Côte d'Ivoire)
FGD(s)	Focus Group Discussion(s)
OGBV	Online Gender-Based Violence
PDCI	Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire
RHDP	Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix
TCRA	Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
WHRD(s)	Women Human Rights Defender(s)
WIP(s)	Women in Politics

Executive Summary

The expansion of social media platforms and generative AI has reshaped political mobilization, activism, and public discourse across Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire. While these platforms offer women in politics (WIPs) and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) new avenues for visibility and advocacy, they have also become primary sites of gendered hostility, surveillance, and abuse. This report examines the prevalence, patterns, and consequences of online gender-based violence (OGBV) targeting WIPs and WHRDs across the full 2025 electoral cycle in both countries, drawing on quantitative analysis of over 100,000 social media posts alongside focus group discussions with 16 women in Tanzania and 20 in Côte d'Ivoire.

The findings show that OGBV is not an occasional hazard of digital political life but a structural condition of it. Personal attacks and insults remained the dominant form of harmful content across every monitoring phase in both countries. Rather than engaging with women's manifestos or policy positions, abuse consistently targeted their bodies, sexuality, marital status, and reproductive roles, reflecting patriarchal expectations about legitimate femininity and leadership rather than genuine political disagreement. These experiences varied across individual women, shaped by age, parental status, and perceived conformity to gendered norms, and cannot be generalized.

Electoral periods functioned as risk amplifiers rather than neutral moments of political contestation. Post volumes nearly tripled during Tanzania's election period relative to its pre-election baseline, while Côte d'Ivoire recorded a comparable surge around its presidential and legislative elections. Campaign hashtags originally designed for mobilization or national cohesion were appropriated as vehicles for gendered hostility, showing that the same digital infrastructure that enables women's political participation is also the infrastructure most readily weaponized against them. Generative AI has introduced a further shift: deepfakes, fabricated footage, and sexualized composite imagery inflict harm disproportionate to the effort required to produce them, with damage that persists well beyond the political moment that prompted it. The consequences for targeted women were severe and cumulative, spanning psychological distress, lasting reputational harm, and withdrawal from platforms or public life altogether, while formal reporting and institutional protection remained rare and inadequate in both countries.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that OGBV follows a predictable arc across the electoral cycle: it intensifies ahead of elections, changes character during campaigns, and persists in an altered but unresolved form afterward. This predictability underpins the report's recommendations, which call for electoral bodies and governments to build digital safety into election planning and subject internet shutdowns to independent oversight; for platforms to invest in local-language moderation and rapid-response protocols for AI-generated abuse; for political parties to adopt codes of conduct and resource support for women candidates; and for civil society and donors to sustain full-electoral-cycle monitoring and fund OGBV detection tools in Swahili, French, and other locally relevant languages.

Background

The advent of social media has significantly reshaped political mobilization, activism, and public discourse. Platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok facilitate immediate communication, grassroots organization, and the amplification of diverse voices, redefining citizen engagement and political participation.¹ In the digital era, social media platforms are no longer seen solely as communication platforms; they have become spaces where political identities and opinions are shaped, constituencies are mobilized, advocacy is organized, and public debate is carried out. For women in politics and women human rights defenders (WHRDs), these platforms form part of the everyday infrastructure of public life. Hashtags, viral posts, and live streams enable politicians and activists to rally supporters, respond to unfolding events, build solidarity, influence policymaking, and draw attention to significant social and political issues.² Yet the same spaces that expand visibility and participation also expose women to intensified forms of gendered hostility, surveillance, and abuse.

Violence in political and civic life is not only confined to either online or offline spaces; for women in politics and women human rights defenders, these two are often intertwined. Online attacks can trigger offline attacks and vice versa, including intimidation, death threats, reputational damage, and withdrawal from public engagement.³ In Tanzania, a mapping of women human rights defenders found that they had been threatened; some experienced digital harassment, indicating that digital harms form part of a broader pattern of violence rather than an isolated problem.⁴ Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, women human rights defenders have documented being targeted both online and offline and ostracized.⁵ Abuse is often directed at women's ideas,

¹ Kalungi, B. D., & Sophie, N. (2024). Metropolitan Journal of Social and Educational Research Analyzing The Role Of The Media In Promoting Human Rights In Uganda. A Case Study Of Nansana Municipality Wakiso District.

² Rebecca, Namuyonga & Margaret, Okee & Nancy, Musiimenta. (2025). THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN UGANDA: CASE STUDY OF TWITTER AND FACEBOOK USERS BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY. 4. 509-524.

³ Freda, (2024). Political Violence against Women: Challenges and Solutions for Greater Political Participation, <https://www.wdnuganda.org/insights/-political-violence-against-women-challenges-and-solutions-for-greater-political-participation->

⁴ Defend Defenders(2023).THE STATE OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN Tanzania, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo

⁵ International Service for Human Rights(2019), Establish a mechanism to protect human rights defenders

political positions, their bodies, sexuality, and family roles and is largely shaped by patriarchal expectations about leadership and femininity rather than acts of incivility.

Furthermore, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), specifically generative AI, has influenced a significant amplification of image-based abuse, cyber harassment through deepfakes, misinformation, and the creation of synthetic histories to defame women in politics.⁶ The emergence of generative AI not only reduces the cost but also the effort required to produce convincing synthetic content, increasing both the speed and scale at which reputational attacks can spread across digital platforms. Worse still, advances in generative AI have made manipulated content such as deepfakes increasingly realistic and difficult to distinguish from authentic content in real time. This makes it significantly harder for victims to challenge or disprove false narratives before they spread widely. Online Gender Based Violence (OGBV) significantly deters women in politics from campaigning, holding office, advocating for policies, or withdrawing from politics altogether and undermines their ability to embrace and meaningfully use digital technologies as they self-censor and in some instances totally withdraw from online spaces.⁷

Similarly, OGBV significantly affects Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), functioning as a tool of intimidation intended to silence their public engagement and advocacy. WHRDs advocate across a broad range of issues, including gender equality, prevention of gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, democratic governance, civic space, land and environmental rights, economic justice, and the rights of marginalized communities.⁸ OGBV undermines these efforts by increasing the costs and risks of public engagement, leading many defenders to self-censor, reduce their online visibility, or withdraw from digital spaces altogether.⁹ These limitations on WHRDs' online participation have consequences that extend beyond individual safety to broader civic engagement and accountability. Low educational attainment, financial constraints, and cultural norms and stereotypes further compound this

⁶ Olorunnisola, A. A., & Martin, B. L. (2013). Influences of media on social movements: Problematizing hyperbolic inferences about impacts. *Telematics and informatics*, 30(3), 275-288.

⁷ Iyer, N., Nyamwire B., and Nabulega, S., (2020), *Alternate Realities Alternate Internets*.

⁸ Administrator, & Administrator. (2026, May 28). *Confronting Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV): HER internet statement*. - HER internet. HER Internet - Safe for her! <https://www.herinternet.org/confronting-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-tfgbv-her-internet-statement/>

⁹ Cipesa. (2024, March 13). *Webinar: How African Women in Politics are pushing back against Tech-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence*. Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA). <https://cipesa.org/2024/03/webinar-how-african-women-in-politics-are-pushing-back-against-tech-facilitated-gender-based-violence/>

digital exclusion by restricting women's participation in the digital economy.¹⁰

While African governments have pledged to combat gender-based violence by enacting national protective laws and ratifying international treaties to advance women's rights, significant gaps remain in the implementation, enforcement, and accessibility of these protections. Community justice systems often prioritize perpetrators' interests over survivors' rights, thus discouraging formal reporting.¹¹ Despite existing legal and policy commitments, online gender-based violence continues to undermine women's political participation and civic engagement. Weak institutional responses, inconsistent enforcement, and limited accountability for perpetrators allow abusive behaviour to persist, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as elections.

This report builds on an established body of research on OGBV in Africa. Earlier work, including *Alternate Realities*, *Alternate Internets*, *Amplified Abuse*¹², and *Byte Bullies*¹³, shows that women in politics are targeted with coordinated, sexualized, and reputational attacks that seek to silence them and erode their credibility. This report therefore, is a continuation of this effort, and its contribution lies in extending the research to more countries, specifically Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire, where digital platforms are increasingly central to political communication and advocacy yet gendered violence continues to shape women's participation in public discourse.

Methodology

The study employed mixed methods with qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data was gathered through reviewing existing literature, conducting focus group discussions (FGDs), and data scraping of raw social media data obtained from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

¹⁰ Closing the Gender Digital Divide in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Transformative Approach to Digital Inclusion Réseau des Femmes Leaders pour le Développement. (2024, April 10). RFLD. <https://rflgd.org/2024/04/10/closing-the-gender-digital-divide-in-sub-saharan-africa-a-transformative-approach-to-digital-inclusion/>

¹¹ Report: Survivors of sexual violence in Côte d'Ivoire require appropriate support. (n.d.). International Federation for Human Rights. <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/cote-d-ivoire/report-survivors-of-sexual-violence-in-cote-d-ivoire-require>

¹² Kakande, A., Achieng, G., Iyer, N., Nyamwire, B., Nabulega, S., and Mwendwa, I. (2021) *Amplified Abuse: Report on Online Violence Against Women in the 2021 Uganda General Election*. Retrievable from <https://vawp.policcy.org>

¹³ Kakande, A., Nyamwire, B., Saturday, B., Mwendwa, I., (2023) *Byte Bullies*.

Account Sampling

Our account sampling started with stakeholder mapping which included searching for key social media WHRDs and WIP figures' accounts to find the major social media platforms they use. This was followed by FGDs we conducted in both countries with the participants, who included WIPs and WHRDs, which collectively revealed that the commonly used platforms in each of the countries are Facebook and Instagram in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania, respectively. The selected accounts were identified through systematic searches across social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The search strategy involved identifying social media accounts and profiles associated with officially nominated political candidates in both countries while for WHRDs, the search focused on active social media accounts. The sample of WIPs was primarily derived from publicly accessible parliamentary registries and official government records in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania, which served as the basis for account identification and verification. This process was conducted separately for each country, covering WIPs in Côte d'Ivoire¹⁴ and Tanzania¹⁵.

Once potential accounts were identified, a verification process was undertaken. This involved examining posted content, profile pictures, and profile descriptions to confirm whether the accounts belonged to WIPs or WHRDs. Additional accounts were identified through a snowball sampling approach, which included reviewing the official pages of government institutions, political parties, news outlets, and television stations and examining their follower and following networks to locate relevant profiles.

Furthermore, accounts associated with major political parties in each country were included to provide broader contextual insights into the electoral environment and political discourse. This helped ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the online political ecosystem during the election period.

¹⁴ Présidence de la Côte D'Ivoire. (2025, September 23). Composition of the Government - Presidency of the Côte d'Ivoire. Presidency of the Côte d'Ivoire.

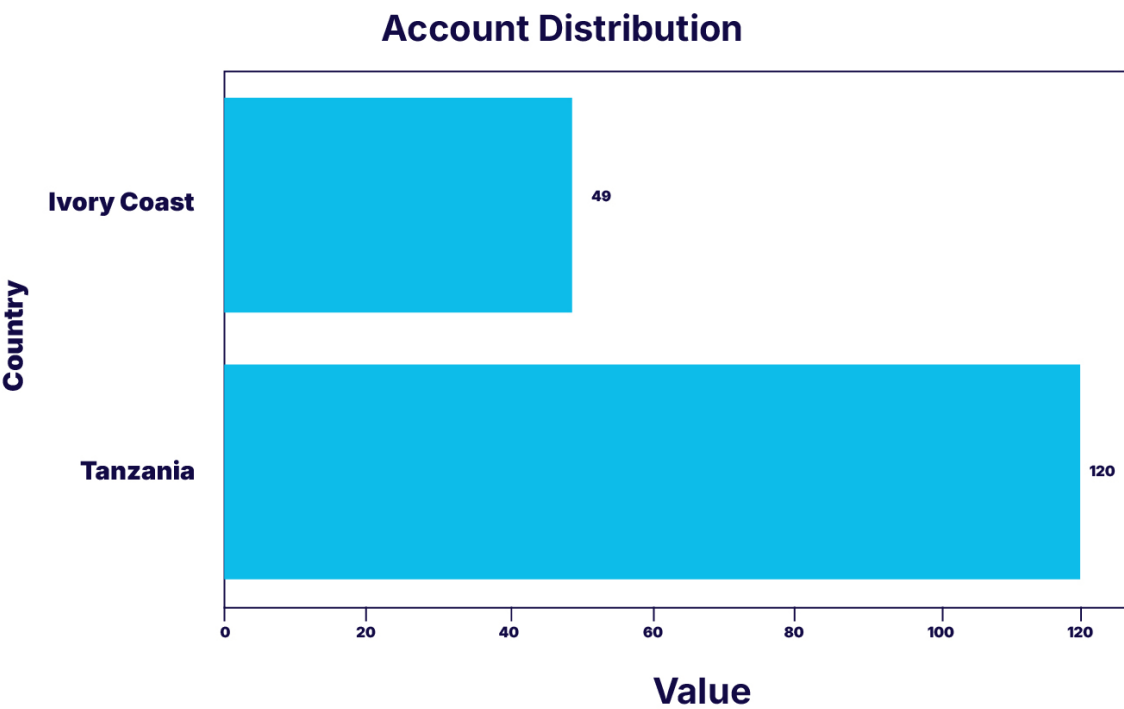
¹⁵ 5th Assembly 2022 - 2027 Tanzania | East African Legislative Assembly. (n.d.). <https://www.eala.org/members/category/tanzania>

Data collection

Data was collected using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. For qualitative, a total of 16 women in Tanzania and 20 in Côte d’Ivoire participated in in-person FGDs. These discussions were designed to explore how women in leadership positions and women human rights defenders navigate online gender-based violence and misinformation during electoral periods in their respective countries. All sessions were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently subjected to qualitative analysis.

A total of 174 accounts were identified for quantitative data collection, comprising 49 from Côte d’Ivoire and 120 from Tanzania, as illustrated in Figure 1. The sample was evenly distributed between women in political leadership and women human rights defenders across the social media platforms Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook. These accounts were analyzed to assess responses to candidates, with comments and replies on existing posts systematically collected. In addition, tweets, posts, and corresponding replies generated by these accounts were gathered to examine patterns of community discourse surrounding the posts and the women themselves.

Figure 1: Showing the distribution of accounts monitored throughout the election period



Time Frame

The raw social media data analyzed in this study comprised posts and comments published covering the period from 1st January to 31st December 2025. To capture variations in online discourse across the electoral cycle, data were collected in three phases corresponding to the pre-election, election, and post-election periods. These phases included 1st January – 30th June 2025 (pre-election for both countries), 1 July–1 October 2025 (election period for Tanzania but pre-election for Côte d'Ivoire), and 1 October–31 December 2025 (post-election period for Tanzania but election period for Côte d'Ivoire). This approach enabled the study to examine changes in the digital environment across the full electoral cycles of both countries.

The table below presents the data collection period and its alignment with the electoral cycles in both countries.

Data Collection Phase	Time Period (2025)	Tanzania	Côte d'Ivoire	Purpose
Phase 1	1st Jan to June 30th	Pre-election	Pre-election	To establish baseline patterns of online discourse before elections
Phase 2	1st July to 1st October	Election Period	Pre-election	Capture changes in online discourse during election period for Tanzania while Cote d'Ivoire remained in the pre-election periodd
Phase 3	1st October to 31st December	Post-election Period	Election	Examine post-election discourse alongside election-related discourse in Cote d'Ivoire
Overall Study Period	1st Jan to 31st December	Full electoral cycle	Full electoral cycle	Analyse changes in online discourse in both countries during electoral cycles.

Data Analysis: Sentiment, Emotion and OGBV analysis

The study examined sentiment, emotional expression, and the prevalence of OGBV in the online spaces of the selected women in the two countries. Some of the data obtained online was in local but official languages of the two countries; French for Côte d'Ivoire and Swahili for Tanzania. This, as a result, required the first step of the data pre-processing to translate all collected text into English to enable consistent analysis.

Following translation, machine learning models were used to analyze sentiment and emotions in the text. For sentiment analysis, we applied three models—twitter-roberta-base-sentiment-latest, twitter-xlm-roberta-base-sentiment, and sentiment-roberta-large-english—classified each post and comment as positive, negative, or neutral. The final sentiment classification for each text was determined by combining the predictions from all three models. This approach was used to reduce the influence of any single model and improve overall reliability.

A similar process was followed for emotion analysis. Three models, emotion-english-distilroberta-base, distilbert-base-uncased-emotion, and the emotion-english-roberta-large, were used to classify text into emotional categories including joy, anger, fear, sadness, surprise, disgust, love, and neutral. The final emotions assigned to each of the posts were aggregated based on the combined outputs of the three models to ensure a more balanced and reliable result.

For the analysis of OGBV, no existing models were available that could directly classify texts into the specific categories required for this study. To address this issue, a zero-shot classification approach was used. This method allows a model to categorize text into predefined groups without needing prior training on labeled examples for those categories. For this task, an optimized version of Gemma 3 was used, an open-source large language model (LLM) developed by Google. The model was provided with clear definitions of each category and tasked to classify each piece of text accordingly. The categories included personal attacks, coercion and sextortion, gendered slurs, cyberstalking and surveillance, doxxing and identity attacks, defamation and reputation attacks, and neutral. This approach made it possible to systematically identify and categorize OGBV-related content without developing a new model from scratch.

2.0 Findings

These findings are based on both quantitative social media data and qualitative data derived from FGDs held in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire throughout 2025. These two datasets together provide a detailed picture of how OGBV manifests during electoral cycles, how it varies by context, and its effects on women's civic and political lives. The quantitative analysis is based on over 100,000 social media posts from Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter), and the qualitative findings come from FGDs with 16 women leaders in Tanzania and 20 in Côte d'Ivoire.

2.1 Experiences of WIPs and WHRDs online

The digital public sphere is not a neutral space for political engagement. For WIPs and WHRDs in both Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire, online environments are characterized by increased vulnerability to gender-based hostility, systemic delegitimization, and organized abuse. The findings in this section detail the manifestations, patterns, and contextual factors that drove this hostility during the 2025 monitoring period.

2.1.1 Women leaders are subjected to multiple forms of OGBV

Across both countries, the quantitative analysis revealed that WIPs and WHRDs were subjected to a wide range of OGBV typologies, with personal attacks and insults constituting the most prevalent forms of abuse. In Tanzania, the OGBV classification of Instagram data during the January to July 2025 pre-election period identified personal attacks as the dominant category of harmful content, a finding that remained consistent across all three monitoring phases as illustrated in Figure 4. In Côte d'Ivoire, the analysis of Facebook data over the same period revealed insults as the leading form of OGBV, as illustrated in Figure 2 below, followed by hate speech and body shaming. While non-violent and congratulatory content comprised the majority of replies in absolute terms, the persistence of abusive content across every monitoring window underscores that hostility is not episodic but constitutive of the digital environment that WIPs and WHRDs navigate.

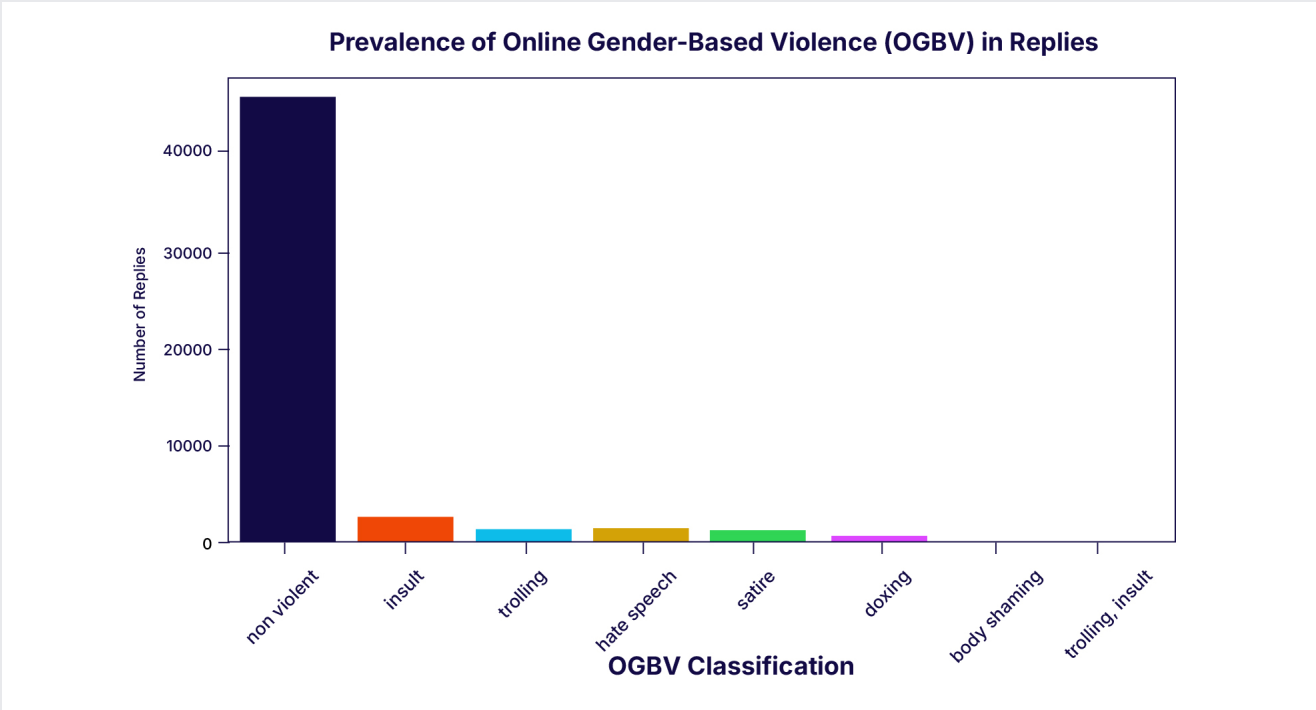


Figure 2: Illustrating the distribution of OGBV classifications in replies, Côte d'Ivoire Facebook (Jan-Jul 2025)



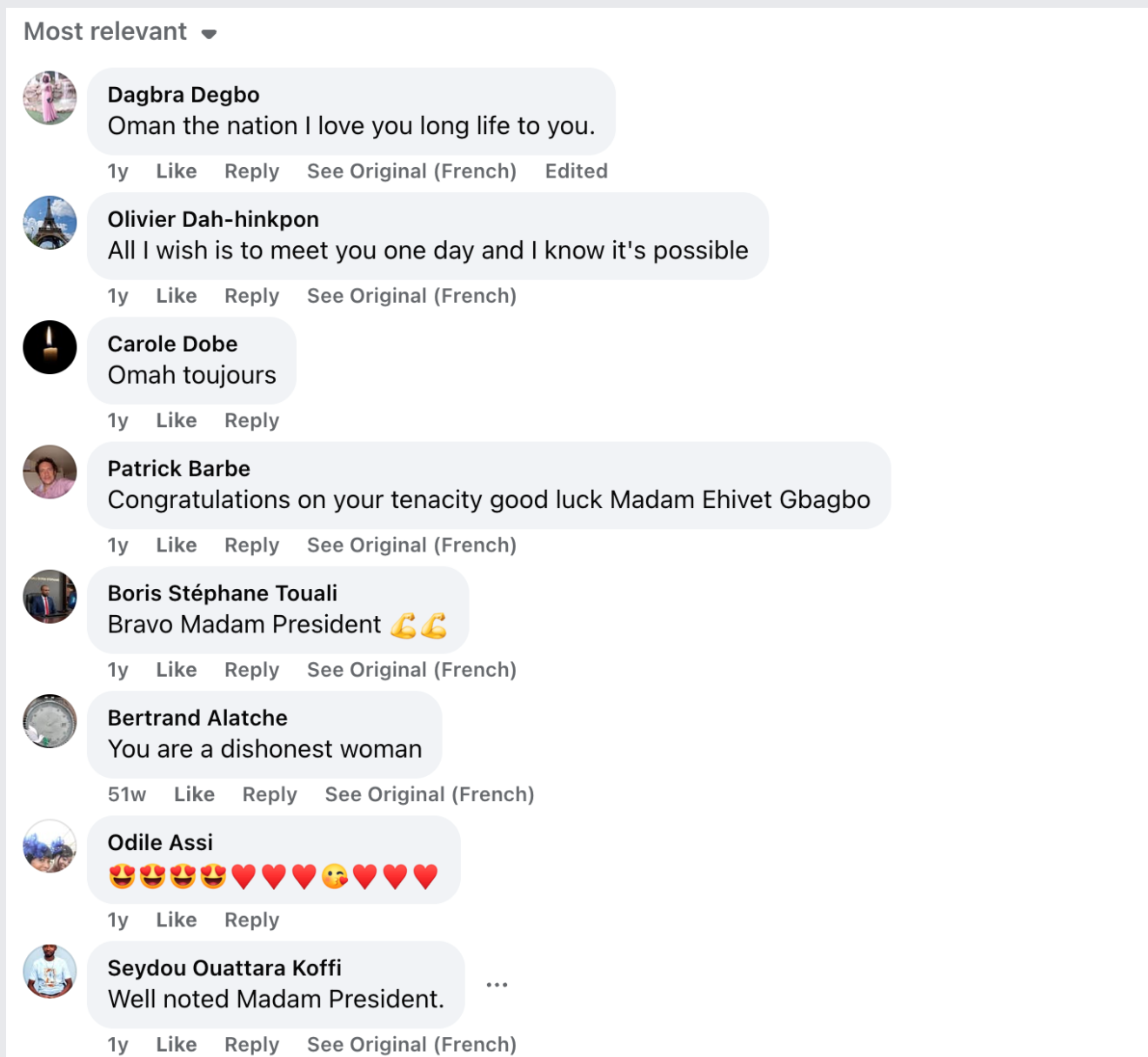


Figure 3: Screenshot of comments on a post from a WIP in Côte d'Ivoire — the majority of comments are positive, but negative replies labeling the woman as dishonest are visible. This illustrates the quantitative finding that hostile content persists and targets women's credibility even when overall sentiment is predominantly supportive.

The FGD discussions confirm and enhance the existing typological patterns. In Tanzania, fourteen out of sixteen respondents reported experiencing or witnessing harassment across platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter. Participants reported incidents ranging from body-based insults and comments about marital status to severe violations such as account hacking, identity theft, and the creation and dissemination of AI-generated deepfake imagery. One participant described an incident where a perpetrator cut her photograph, superimposed it onto sexually explicit content, and sent the fabricated image to her mother—demonstrating a deliberate strategy of intimate humiliation intended to extend harm beyond the primary victim.¹⁶

“This person was cutting my pictures, cutting the head and putting another woman doing something sexual... that person sent that picture to my mother... I was so stressed that I tried to report it and also asked for help.”¹⁷

In Côte d'Ivoire, participants reported that WIPs were ridiculed for minor speech errors, with online debate and mockery continuing for days after such incidents. Participants also noted that minor mistakes often led to the widespread creation and circulation of caricatures and derogatory imagery. As one participant explained,

“trolls wait to see what mistakes in language... they use that to mock the person.”

Even prominent WIPs like ministers faced sustained ridicule for minor speech errors and widespread creation of caricatures and images.¹⁸ Across both contexts, the abuse experiences described by participants were closely aligned with the OGBV categories identified from the social media analysis.

¹⁶ Focus Group Discussion_Tanzania

¹⁷ FGD participant

¹⁸ FGD participant_Côte d'Ivoire

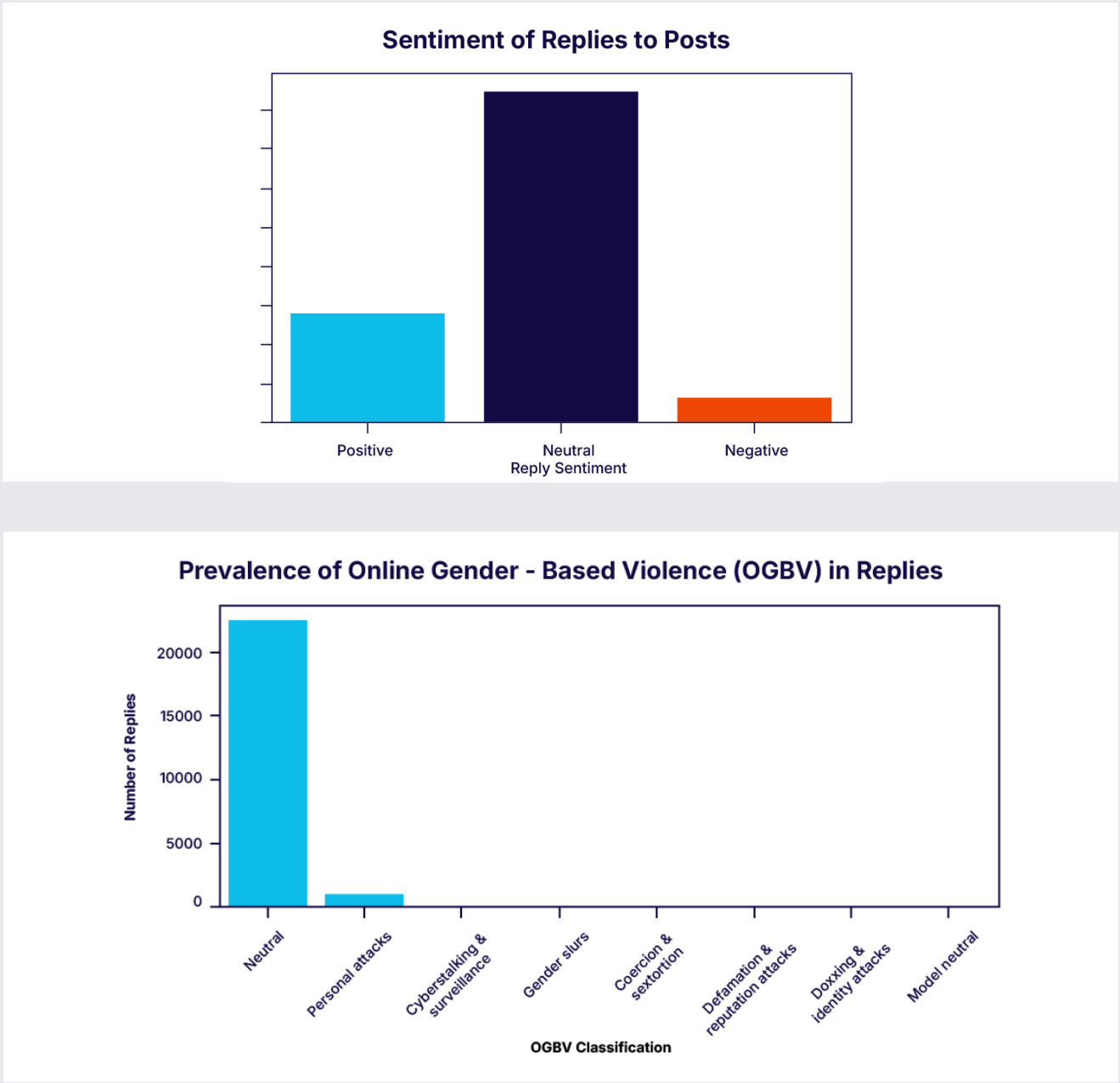


Figure 4: Reply sentiment distribution, Tanzania Instagram (Jan–Jul 2025)



Figure 5: Shows the sample translated OGBV negative sentiments received by a WIP in Tanzania — illustrating the specific language and nature of personal attacks documented in the scraped Instagram data

Cyberstalking and surveillance also emerged as significant categories in the Tanzania social media analysis, demonstrating that technology-facilitated abuse did not remain confined to digital platforms but, in some instances, escalated into offline intimidation and physical targeting. This pattern was particularly evident within the broader political environment of the period. On 20 June 2025, ACT-Wazalendo women’s wing chairperson Janeth Rithe—a woman in politics—was detained after police sought her following criticism of the government at a campaign rally, illustrating how online visibility increasingly translated into offline targeting.¹⁹ By May 2025, the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority had restricted access to X (formerly Twitter), Clubhouse, and Telegram, narrowing digital civic space and likely shifting political activity and surveillance toward platforms such as Instagram that remained accessible.²⁰ Reports surrounding the January 2025 abduction of journalist, government

¹⁹ Reporter, C. (2025, June 23). ACT-Wazalendo demands justice as Janeth Rithe remains in custody - The Chanzo. The Chanzo Initiative. <https://thechanzo.com/2025/06/23/act-wazalendo-demands-justice-as-janeth-rithe-remains-in-custody/>

²⁰ Tanzania: Deepening repression threatens elections. (2025, September 29). Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/29/tanzania-deepening-repression-threatens-elections>

critic, and WHRD Maria Sarungi Tsehai, who later stated that her abductors sought access to her social media accounts, illustrate the weaponization of platform visibility features as mechanisms of surveillance and control. These events further reinforce the conclusion that Instagram's visibility features were actively weaponized within a broader ecosystem of monitoring and intimidation directed at women engaged in political and civic expression.

2.1.2 Abuse is Shaped by Intersectional Stereotypes

A key characteristic of OGBV in both countries is that it is primarily directed not at women's political positions or policy agendas, but at their identities, bodies, and perceived transgressions of patriarchal norms. In Tanzania, FGD participants repeatedly stated that hostile comments focused on physical appearance, sexuality, marital status, and reproductive roles instead of engaging with political substance. One participant put it plainly:

“ Instead of people coming to comment about their manifesto, they are commenting about how this woman looks like.” ²¹

This pattern extends to women contesting for political office, where participants described body-shaming comments made in direct response to candidates' nomination bids:

“ Some of the people, they were just putting the comments according to their body. Because they are fat, so they're saying, oh...look at your cheeks, big cheeks, or fat lady.” ²²

Beyond appearance, participants also pointed to marital status and perceived failure to fulfil reproductive roles as recurring targets of abuse, describing comments directed at a woman for not having children:

²¹ FGD participant

²² FGD participant_Tanzania

“Instead of politics it’s better for her to go and find ways she can get a child... because many women like her nowadays, they have children, but she doesn’t have a child.”²³

These types of attacks are not simply a form of rudeness but a structural delegitimization strategy, one that recasts women as objects of social scrutiny rather than subjects of political authority. In both national contexts, abuse was ideologically underpinned by cultural stereotypes of femininity and domesticity. In Tanzania, both WIPs and WHRDS experienced different intersectional attacks tailored to their respective demographic profiles such as age, parental status. Women perceived as professionally successful drew comments that questioned what sort of men would marry a hardworking woman.²⁴

In Côte d’Ivoire, a similar pattern was noted by the participants on how OGBV was frequently shaped less by what a woman said or did in her public role than by how closely she conformed to gendered expectations of appearance, tone, and deference. Participants described how attacks against women in leadership consistently gravitated toward physical appearance and manner of speech rather than substantive political positions. As one participant observed:

“Most often, when a woman [is attacked], she focuses much more on her physical appearance, or they wait for her to just say one word... [to] mock the person.”²⁵

This pattern reveals how OGBV operationalizes intersecting stereotypes about gender and legitimacy: women’s fitness for public life is interrogated through appearance and speech in ways that function as proxies for their perceived right to occupy political space at all in both countries.

²³ FGD participant

²⁴ FGD participant

²⁵ FGD participant_Cote d’Ivoire

2.2 How Electoral Cycles Influence the Intensity, Volume, and Nature of Online Violence Targeting Women?

What emerged consistently in both countries was that OGBV was not static. The intensity, volume and character of the contestation were variable over the electoral cycles in patterned ways, and each phase (pre-election, election, and post-election) had its own dynamic arising from the interplay of heightened political contestation and persistent patriarchal hostility. The monitoring framework divides the 2025 data collection into three time periods, thereby enabling a longitudinal analysis of the unfolding of OGBV in tandem with political developments. This section traces this evolution, including quantitative trends in the scraped data and qualitative views from FGD participants.

2.2.1 Online Violence Intensifies During Election Period

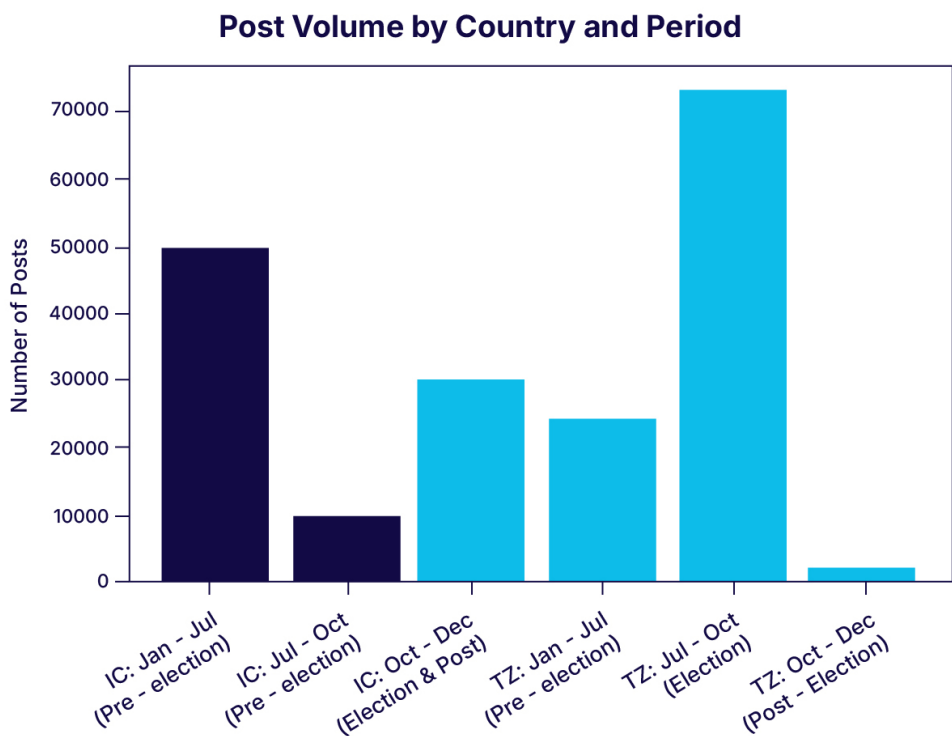


Figure 6: Compares social media post volumes across election-related periods in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania (2025), presented without temporal alignment due to differing national election cycles. Côte d'Ivoire activity peaks in the post-election period, while Tanzania shows a pronounced surge during its election period, highlighting distinct engagement dynamics across the two contexts.

A clear observation from the quantitative data was that the volume and intensity of OGBV against the WIPs and WHRDs increased during election periods. The election period from July to October 2025 in Tanzania generated approximately 73,000 posts, nearly three times as many as in the pre-election period, as illustrated in Figure 6. This represented the largest amount of data observed throughout the study. The period also recorded the highest total number of personal attacks for any of the monitoring windows. The largest single-day spikes in negative sentiment occurred just prior to the October election date, with some days registering over 350 instances of negative sentiment.

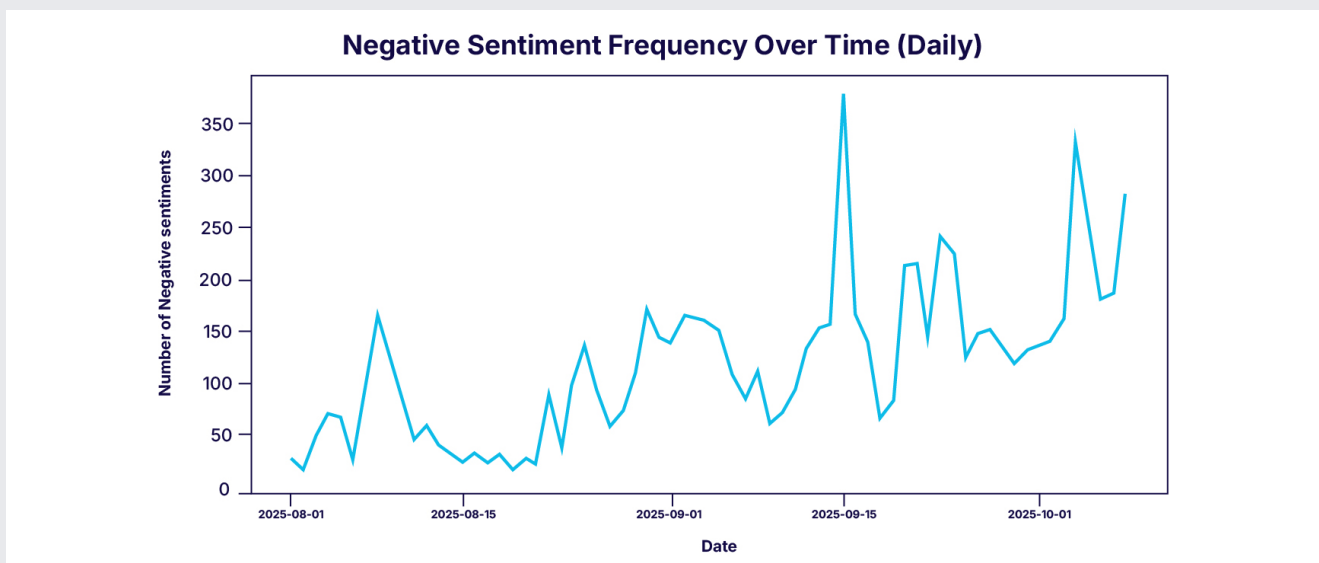


Figure 7: Negative sentiment spikes during election period, Tanzania Instagram (Jul–Oct 2025)

In Côte d'Ivoire, a similar increase was observed from October to December 2025, encompassing the presidential election on 25 October and the legislative elections on 27 December. Post volume rose from a mid-year low of 8,654 posts to approximately 30,000 during the election period. Although positive sentiment remained higher than negative sentiment overall, negative discourse intensified around several highly contested political developments, including the exclusion of opposition leaders from the presidential race, debates surrounding President Alassane Ouattara's fourth-term candidacy,²⁶ election-related misinformation and disinformation,²⁷ and

²⁶ Melly, P. (2025, October 22). Côte d'Ivoire election is a missed opportunity to give voters a real democratic choice. Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/10/cote-divoire-election-missed-opportunity-give-voters-real-democratic-choice>

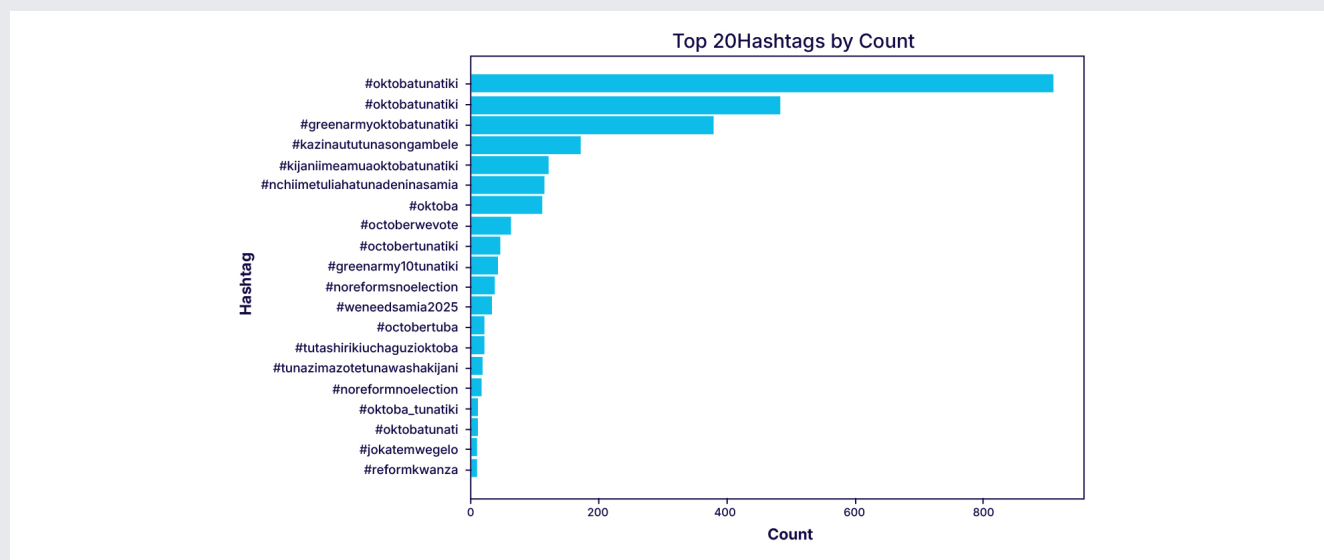
²⁷ En Côte d'Ivoire, de nombreuses infos ont cherché à perturber l'élection présidentielle du 25 octobre. (2025, October 25). Factuel. <https://factuel.afp.com/doc.afp.com.827269F>

the government's response to opposition protests.²⁸ These events generated highly polarized online discussions centered on prominent political

figures and the legitimacy of the electoral process. In both countries, the magnitude of the electoral surge in OGBV indicates that elections are periods of heightened risk for women in political and civic life. During these periods, already hostile online political discourse becomes substantially more intense.

2.2.2 The Nature Of Abuse Changes During Campaigns

Electoral periods not only increased the volume of online abuse but also altered its character. The qualitative data from Tanzania indicated that campaign periods introduced a heightened degree of politically motivated targeting, wherein individual women were attacked not only as women in politics but also as proxies for contested political positions and party affiliations. The emergence of polarizing electoral hashtags as vehicles for gendered abuse was particularly illustrative: Tanzania's ruling party campaign hashtag **#OktobaTunatiki** (We Tick the Box in October) became so strongly associated with online harassment that, as FGD participants noted, everywhere the hashtag appeared, hate speech and bullying could be found.²⁹ The hashtag had transformed from a political campaign tool into a marker of hostile territory for women engaged in oppositional or reform-oriented public discourse.



²⁸ Presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire: hundreds of protesters arrested in banned opposition protests - Civicus Monitor. (n.d.). Civicus Monitor. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/presidential-elections-in-c%C3%B4te-divoire-hundreds-of-protesters-arrested-one-protester-killed-in-banned-opposition-protests/>

²⁹ Focus group discussion_Tanzania

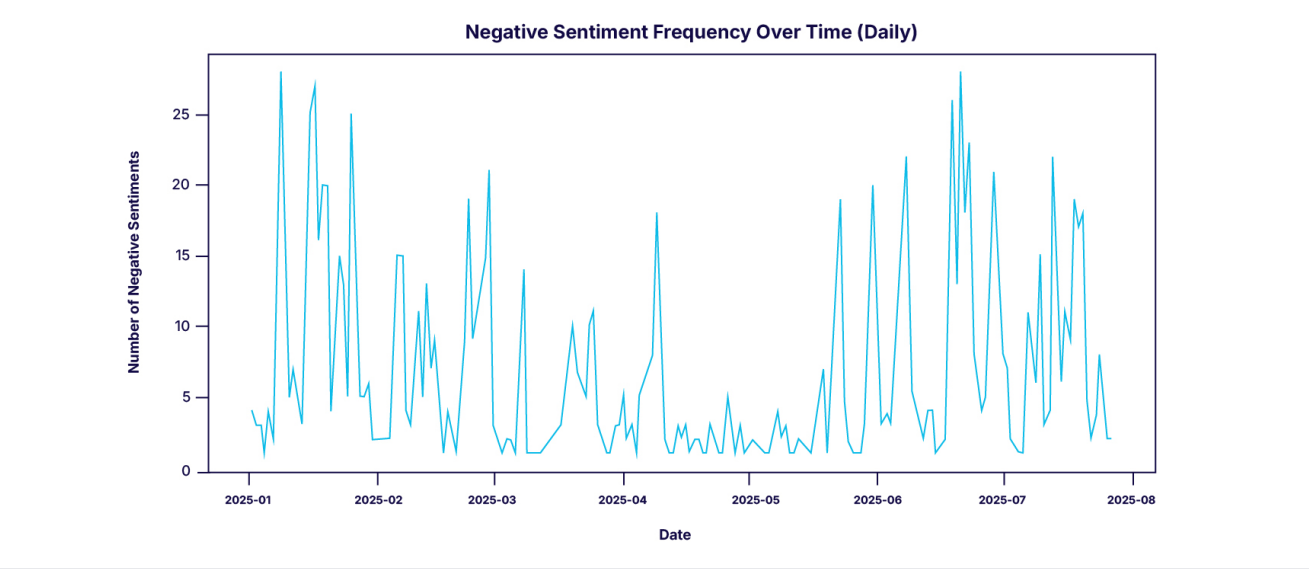
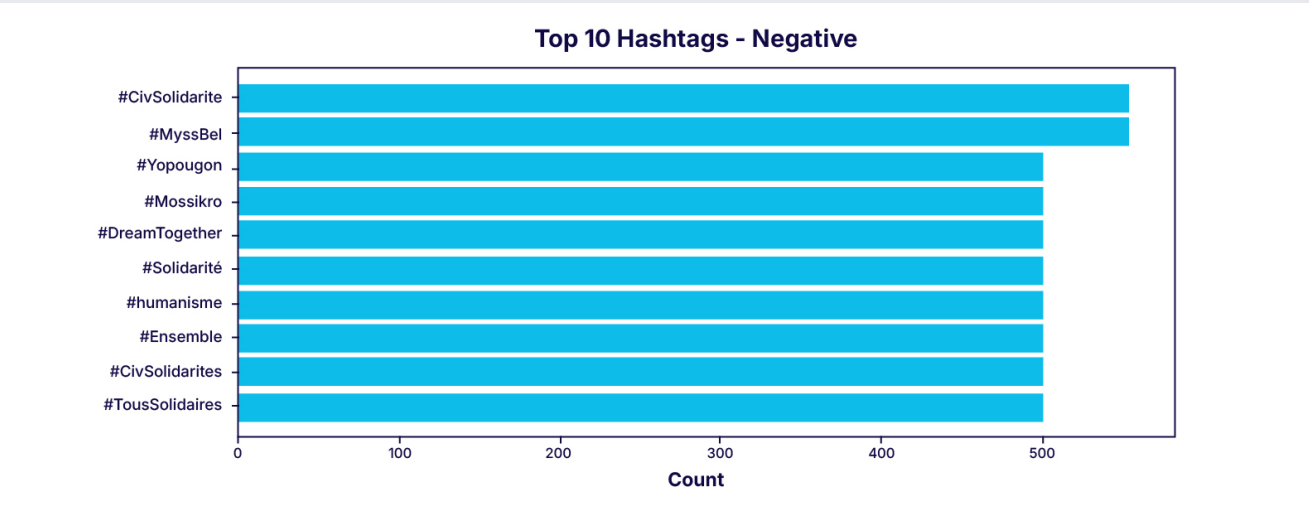


Figure 8: hashtag distribution and negative sentiment spikes pre-election period of T.Z

In Côte d'Ivoire, a similar dynamic was observed in relation to the hashtags associated with national cohesion and peace messaging, including **#MyCôte**, **#CivSolidaire**, and **#TousSolidaires**. Although these hashtags were originally deployed to frame political communication around unity and stability, users expressing political dissatisfaction adopted them to ensure visibility within trending discourse, effectively embedding hostile and gendered content within streams associated with civic messaging. The quantitative hashtag analysis confirmed that the top hashtags appearing in negative-sentiment replies were the same politically salient terms dominating the broader electoral conversation, indicating that campaign-period discourse does not separate civic participation from gendered hostility but interweaves them.



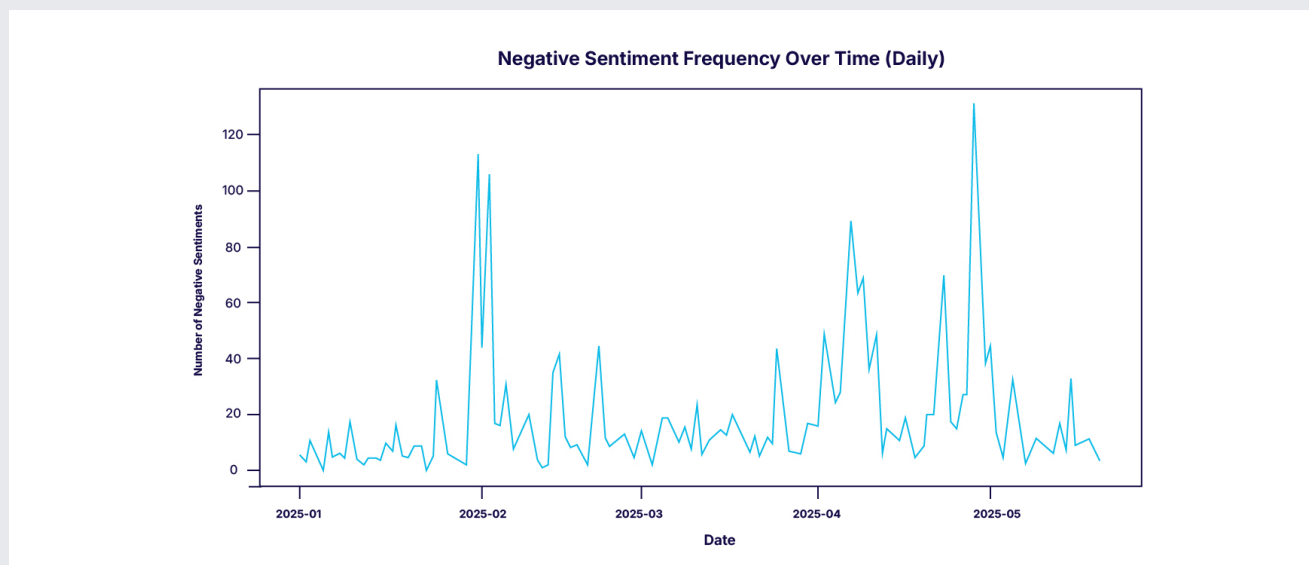


Figure 9: Hashtag distribution of the hashtags associated with Negative sentiments in Côte d'Ivoire

2.2.3 Women Candidates May Face Specific Attacks At Specific Moments Of Political Visibility

The temporal analysis of negative sentiment spikes reveals that escalations in OGBV are not randomly distributed across the electoral calendar but correspond to identifiable moments of heightened political salience. In Côte d'Ivoire, distinct spikes in negative sentiment were recorded in late February, late March, and mid-to-late May 2025 (pre-election), as illustrated in Figure 9 above. The rise from February onwards coincided with increased political activity ahead of Côte d'Ivoire's presidential election in October 2025. The period ended with the creation of the 25-party Coalition for Peaceful Alternation (CAP-CI) in March 2025 and was marked by increasingly polarized political discourse online, including identity-based narratives. This broader pattern is also present in the gender-based insults we find in our collection of online conversations related to elections.³⁰ The March surge came amid renewed controversy over the French citizenship of PDCI presidential candidate Tidjane Thiam. The official publication of his renunciation of French nationality on 20 March 2025 closed the public debate on his eligibility, reviving identity-based political narratives and long-standing debates around "ivoirité." This period in our dataset also saw an increase in attacks on WIPs, suggesting that gendered abuse also increased with broader political polarisation.³¹ The most significant spike occurred on 20–21

³⁰ AfricaNews. (2025, May 6). Ivory Coast: opposition coalition calls for electoral reform ahead of presidential election. Africanews. <https://www.africanews.com/2025/05/06/ivory-coast-opposition-coalition-calls-for-electoral-reform-ahead-of-presidential-election> and was marked by increasingly polarized online political discourse/

³¹ Guessan, P. (2025, March 20). Côte d'Ivoire : Tidjane Thiam est devenu exclusivement ivoirien. FratMat. <https://www.fratmat.info/article/2632450/politique/pdci/cote-divoire-tidjane-thiam-est-devenu-exclusivement-ivoirien>

May 2025, when false claims of a coup, facilitated by AI-generated content and repurposed footage, circulated widely. Independent fact-checking investigations revealed the coordinated cross-platform amplification of these false narratives during the election period. In our data set, this disinformation episode was also accompanied by a sharp increase in coordinated gendered attacks against women in politics and an increased use of politically charged hashtags targeting female political actors.³² The two female presidential candidates in Côte d'Ivoire, Simone Ehivet Gbagbo and Henriette Lagou Adjoua, were among the five candidates validated by the Constitutional Council on 8 September 2025.³³ Their candidacies were confirmed within an electoral environment already characterized by the exclusion of several prominent opposition figures, widespread political protests, arrests of opposition supporters, and growing restrictions on civic and political space.³⁴ Consequently, their increased online visibility coincided with a period of heightened political polarization, making them more vulnerable to the gendered hostility observed in the dataset.³⁵ This meant that their online visibility occurred at a time of high political tension, making them more vulnerable to the gendered hostility, which, according to the data, had been more severe at the time.

The Tanzanian analysis identified the highest concentrations of negative sentiment between September and early October 2025. This period coincided with the effective exclusion of Tanzania's two principal opposition forces from meaningful participation in the presidential election—CHADEMA through its disqualification after refusing to sign the electoral code of conduct and ACT-Wazalendo through the repeated disqualification of its presidential candidate, Luhaga Mpina.³⁶ These developments occurred alongside a broader contraction of civic and political space, with domestic and international observers documenting increased restrictions on opposition parties, civil society, journalists, and human rights defenders ahead of the October

³² Disinfo Africa. (2025, July). False claims of a coup d'état in Côte d'Ivoire. Medium. <https://disinfo.africa/false-claims-of-a-coup-d%C3%A9tat-in-c%C3%B4te-d-ivoire-55835575af2b>

³³ Tiemele, D. (2025, September 8). Côte d'Ivoire-AIP/ Henriette Lagou et Simone Gbagbo, les deux dames en lice pour la présidentielle 2025. <https://www.aip.ci/cote-divoire-aip-henriette-lagou-et-simone-gbagbo-les-deux-dames-en-lice-pour-la-presidentielle-2025/>

³⁴ Reuters. (2025, September 8). Ivory Coast formally bars ex-Credit Suisse chief from presidential race. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ivory-coast-formally-bars-ex-credit-suisse-chief-presidential-race-2025-09-08/>

³⁵ Sylvestre-Treiner, A. (2025, October 25). Alassane Ouattara tightens control in Côte d'Ivoire as he seeks fourth term. Le Monde.fr. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2025/10/25/alassane-ouattara-tightens-control-in-cote-d-ivoire-as-he-seeks-fourth-term_6746768_124.html

³⁶ Reporter, C. (2025, September 15). Tanzania's electoral body upholds AG's objection, bars opposition candidate Mpina from presidential race. The Citizen. <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/tanzania-s-electoral-body-upholds-ag-s-objection-bars-opposition-candidate-mpina-from-presidential-race-5193328>

2025 general election.³⁷ Consistent with prior research on election-related online abuse, our findings suggest that politically salient electoral milestones can coincide with heightened levels of OGBV directed at women in politics.³⁸

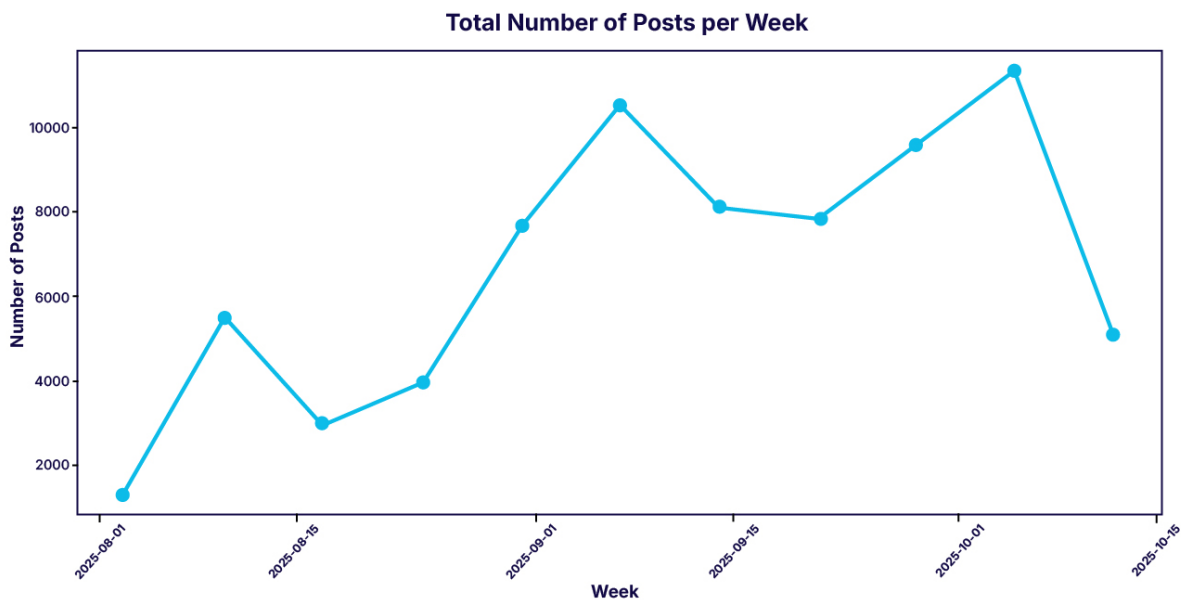


Figure 10: Temporal trends in negative sentiment, Tanzania (Jul–Oct 2025)

2.2.4 Electoral Periods May activate Disinformation and Coordinated Online Abuse

Qualitative findings from both countries evidenced organized or coordinated dimensions of OGBV in elections. But our data didn’t clearly distinguish between spontaneous hostility and coordinated abuse. In Tanzania, participants described how political hashtags became rallying points for focused, hostile activity, with large numbers of anonymous accounts directing abuse toward particular women with consistent messaging. Participants cited the proliferation of fake presidential accounts, doctored screenshots from credible news organizations, and AI-generated content as part of a disinformation ecosystem that contributed to the rise of hostility toward women, suggesting that it was the result of deliberate organization rather than random

³⁷ Amnesty International. (2026, February 26). Tanzania: Authorities instil climate of fear and step up repression ahead of general elections. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/10/tanzania-authorities-instil-climate-of-fear-and-step-up-repression-ahead-of-general-elections/>

³⁸ Zenn, J., & Zenn, J. (2026, April 23). Tanzania Civic Freedom Monitor - ICNL. ICNL. <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/tanzania>

individual actions.³⁹ Some FGD participants also said that individual perpetrators often operated multiple fake accounts simultaneously, making it more difficult to attribute responsibility to any one perpetrator as quoted by one of the participants;

“ I thought the person attacking me was one but it looked like he was using several others to attack me....and I thought they were like six different people, yet it’s only one person harassing me online.”

In Côte d'Ivoire, the disinformation episode of 20–21 May 2025, in which fabricated footage was weaponized as part of a politically charged viral narrative, involved the amplification of content by anonymous and conspiracy-oriented accounts on social media platforms, generating highly polarized engagement in which gendered hostility toward WIPs was embedded within broader anti-government discourse. Participants we spoke to in focus group discussions also described a phenomenon in which fans escalated the situation, drawing targeted women into hostile exchanges they had originally tried to avoid.⁴⁰

2.2.5 Abuse May Persist After Elections but Shift in Form

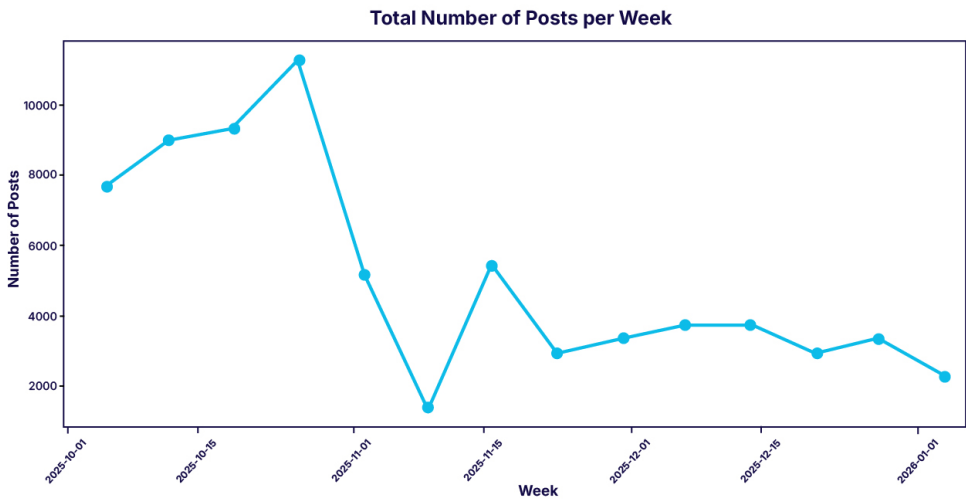
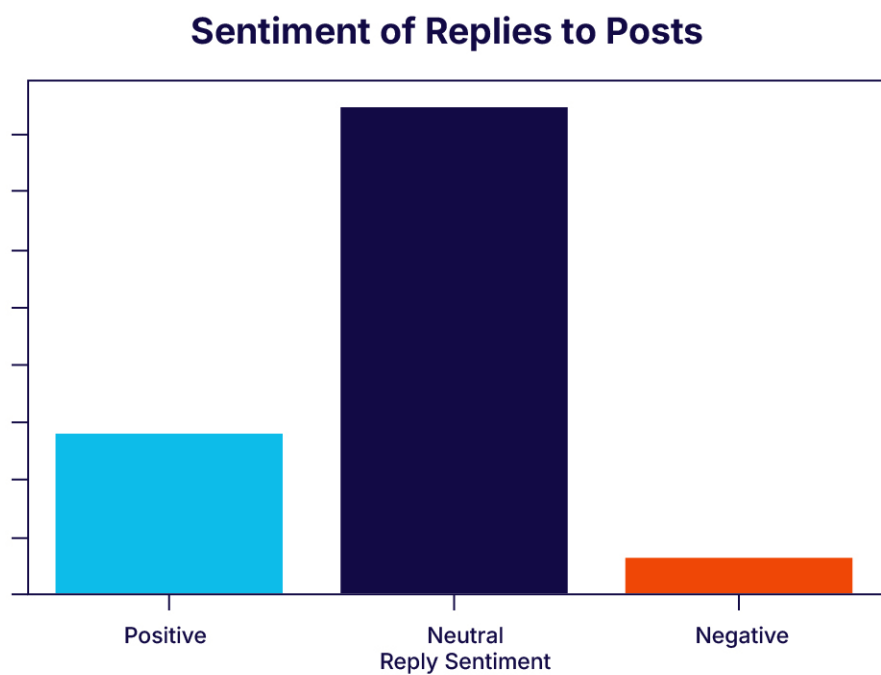


Figure 11: illustrating the severe drop in the number of posts in Tanzania post election

³⁹ Focus group discussion_Tanzania

⁴⁰ Focus group discussion_Cote delvoire

The post-election monitoring period demonstrates that online violence against women does not simply disappear after elections but rather changes in nature and volume. As seen in Tanzania where the post-election period (October to December 2025) saw a significant decrease in data volume, from approximately 73,000 posts during the election period to 1,323 as illustrated in Figure 11 above. This 98% decline, however, was not the result of organic political apathy but rather of state-engineered digital repression. From October 29 to November 3, 2025, the government shut down the internet nationwide.⁴¹ Following the restoration of connectivity, the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) continued to restrict social media and messaging services. Meta confirmed that, in response to TCRA requests, it had restricted access to several Instagram accounts. During that time, several of the platform's most prominent female voices, including prominent feminist critics like Maria Sarungi Tsehai and Mange Kimambi, had their Instagram accounts restricted or removed, significantly reducing their online visibility.⁴²



⁴¹ Tanzania: Government imposes nationwide internet restrictions amid election day protests - Business and Human Rights Centre. (n.d.). Business and Human Rights Centre. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/tanzania-government-imposes-nationwide-internet-restrictions-amid-election-day-protests/>

⁴² Lasteck, A. (2025, December 4). Mange Kimambi: Tanzanian activist blocked from Instagram after mobilising election protests. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwyv7ggqpjpo>

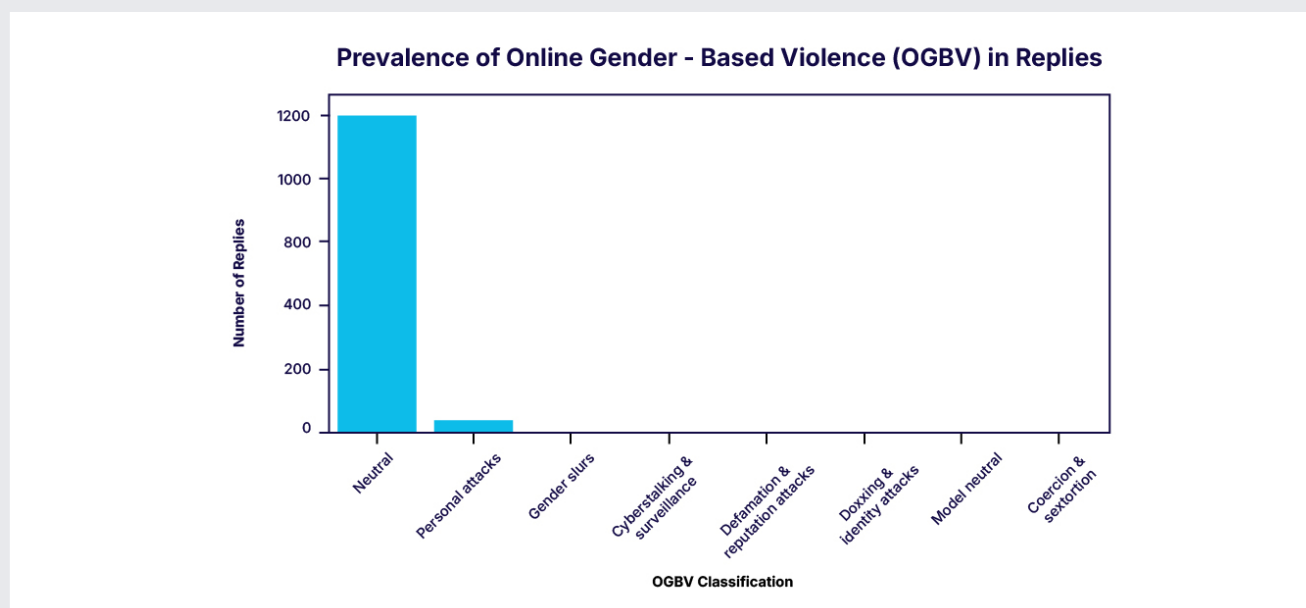


Figure 12: Reply sentiment and OGBV classification of Tanzania, October to December (post-elections) period

The OGBV distribution for the post-election period in Tanzania showed a continuation of personal attacks as the primary form of harassment, along with a small but persistent presence of cyberstalking and identity attacks, despite the dramatically reduced data volume. The persistence of these forms of abuse, even at a lower decibel level and amid an active digital censorship regime, suggested that OGBV did not have a natural endpoint at the electoral moment but continued to be felt in some residual form through the constant visibility of targeted women.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the election cycle stretched into December 2025 with the legislative elections. The legislative election results, which showed the ruling RHDP winning 197 out of 255 seats in the National Assembly, which resulted in continued online mobilization that maintained a politically charged atmosphere for women in the post-presidential-election period.⁴³

The three-phase temporal analysis collectively demonstrates a pattern of change across both country contexts: OGBV intensifies in the lead-up to elections and during peak events, shifts character during campaigns to include politically motivated and potentially coordinated elements, and persists in attenuated and/or transformed forms in the post-election period. This arc has important implications for the timing and design of protective interventions, which must anticipate escalation rather than react to it retrospectively.

⁴³ Tasamba, J. (2025, December 30). Côte d'Ivoire's ruling party secures parliamentary majority. Anadolu. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/ivory-coast-s-ruling-party-secures-parliamentary-majority/3784397>

2.3 Consequences Of OGBV For Women's Political Participation, Psychological Well-Being, And Civic Engagement

The documentation of OGBV prevalence and pattern across monitoring phases acquires its full significance only when read alongside an account of what this violence produces in the lives of those it targets. The consequences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) are neither abstract nor confined to digital spaces; they extend into women's psychological experience, reputational standing, professional trajectories, and willingness to remain in public life. The qualitative evidence from FGDs in both Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire provides a detailed account of these consequences, which operate at multiple intersecting levels and compound over time.

2.3.1 Psychological and Emotional Consequences

FGD participants from both countries consistently and strongly described the psychological toll of ongoing online abuse. In Tanzania, participants reported that harassment led to measurable declines in confidence and self-esteem, directly affecting their performance at work and in public. One of the WHRD women said the level of abusive content caused them to leave platforms altogether or cut back substantially on their online activity. One participant said a woman would post her picture, and the comments that come back were not worth it, a stark account of how the simple act of online visibility becomes unbearable under sustained hostile scrutiny.⁴⁴

In Côte d'Ivoire, the mental health professional consulted during the study confirmed the idea that psychological violence can be more damaging than physical harm precisely because of its invisibility and the social injunction to silence that surrounds it. The expert shared that;

“Psychological violence is more to imagine sometimes than physical... because when it's physical, everybody sees that you are being beaten or... so they can take care of you and send you to a particular place to protect you. But when it is psychological violence, people don't see the violence.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Focus group discussion_Tanzania

⁴⁵ Mental health expert_Cote d'Ivoire

The expert continued and added that:

“ The victim suffers more. Even if they say they are harassed, for example they are told a number of bad words, people will say, no, it’s not just a problem. So most of the victims decide to keep silent and so when they keep silent, it is not a solution because they are suffering. ”

Participants described how targets of online harassment often chose to stay quiet. The keeping of silence was socially conditioned, but it was not a resolution of suffering. It was rather a continuation of suffering under pressure. Even if the content was deleted, it remained accessible forever through search engines, and people could share it with anyone at any time. The online content never disappeared, so the psychological effects of any particular event lasted much longer than the event itself. In Côte d’Ivoire, the mental health expert that was interviewed in this study shared that victims of online violence needed continued mental health assistance ranging from three weeks to three months before they felt restored enough to function independently in some situations.

2.3.2 Reputational and Social consequences

Beyond the immediate psychological effects, OGBV attacks entail long-term reputational and social costs that outlive individual incidents. Participants in Tanzania shared that manipulated content, such as deepfakes, doctored images, and edited screenshots, destroys professional opportunities and personal relationships even when its fabricated nature is uncovered later.⁴⁶ One of the FGD participants explained this further: “Even if the truth emerges, those things will be on the internet forever, and the person who created the content can cause permanent loss of professional opportunities to the victim because of the digital permanence of harmful content.” The asymmetry of rapid flow of harmful material versus slow and imperfect processes of correction or removal is a structural feature of the online environment that amplifies the harm of individual abusive incidents.

In Côte d’Ivoire, the reputational impact of OGBV was particularly due to the long-lasting circulation of caricatures and derogatory images. Participants noted that it can take weeks for malevolent actors to produce and disseminate offensive content about individual women for the

⁴⁶ Focus group discussion_Tanzania

purpose of both wide distribution and permanent record in the digital space.⁴⁷ The social aspect of reputational harm was not just about public reputation but also intimate relationships. Côte d'Ivoire participants mentioned that harassment was not just from strangers but also people in the target's social networks. One of the participants shared that:

“ Harassment is carried out by the person that they know... the friend of a husband, the friend of a boyfriend. ”

This results in complex patterns of relational betrayal and public shame. In Tanzania, the deliberate sharing of sexualized fake images with a participant's mother was an attempt to utilize family relations as a tool for reputational punishment, bringing the social fallout of online abuse into the most intimate aspects of a woman's life.⁴⁸

2.3.3 Consequences for Civic Engagement and Political Participation

The key finding in this section is the cumulative impact of mental distress, reputational damage, and online hostility over time on women's interest to participate in public and political life. Evidence from both countries suggests a pattern in which OGBV does not operate as a series of isolated incidents but rather as a systemic mechanism of exclusion—one that dissuades current participants from remaining involved in public life and dissuades future entrants from seeking it in the first place. In Tanzania, several participants reported leaving particular platforms such as Instagram due to harassment, a form of partial withdrawal that diminishes the reach and impact of women's public communication without entirely excluding them from the political sphere. Others said they engaged in self-censorship—altering what they say, how they present themselves, and what topics they discuss on the internet, in fear of abusive responses. OGBV's chilling effect extends beyond its direct targets. Additionally, Tanzanian participants stated that the ongoing online abuse of women politicians was publicizing its visibility; the abusers' impunity and the lack of effective redress discouraged other women from pursuing a political or public advocacy career.⁴⁹ The cumulative visibility of OGBV, coupled with persistent impunity and inadequate institutional and platform responses, signals to prospective women leaders that participation

⁴⁷ Focus group discussion_Cote delvoire

⁴⁸ Focus group discussion_Tanzania

⁴⁹ Focus group discussion_ Tanzania

in public life carries significant personal risks. These extend beyond conventional online harassment to include AI-generated sexualized imagery, identity theft, account compromise, and the rapid amplification of manipulated content through social media platforms, collectively contributing to a chilling effect on women's political participation.⁵⁰ Both the WIPs' and WHRDs' responses in both countries demonstrated how inadequate the protective mechanisms were when the harm was so extensive and serious. Formal reporting remained very rare in Tanzania, with approximately one in twenty women in our sample reporting abuse to the authorities. Those who sought formal remedies encountered substantial procedural and institutional barriers, including limited awareness of available mechanisms, weak implementation of existing cybercrime legislation, and constrained law enforcement capacity to investigate and prosecute technology-facilitated abuse. These challenges were further compounded by the anonymity and pseudonymity afforded by digital platforms, which can make identifying perpetrators particularly difficult.⁵¹

In Côte d'Ivoire, the dedicated GBV reporting line lacked specialists on digital violence, and mental health support was provided informally through WhatsApp and video call sessions—an inventive but fragile substitute for a structured, publicly funded response infrastructure. In both contexts, widespread OGBV, limited recourse, and active or passive impunity for perpetrators created a climate in which women's participation in the public sphere was systematically more costly with implications not only for individual women but also for the democratic quality of political representation and civic life.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research set out to examine how WIPs and WHRDs in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire are treated in online spaces, how electoral cycles shape the intensity and character of that treatment, and what consequences OGBV carries for women's political participation, psychological well-being, and civic engagement. Read together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence from both countries converges on a single conclusion: OGBV is not an occasional hazard of digital political life but a structural condition of it. Personal attacks and insults remained the dominant category

⁵⁰ When justice fails: Why women can't get protection from AI deepfake abuse | UN Women – Headquarters. (2026, February 26). UN Women – Headquarters. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/when-justice-fails-why-women-cant-get-protection-from-ai-deepfake-abuse>

⁵¹ Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) in Tanzania - detailed report. (n.d.). UNFPA Tanzania. <https://tanzania.unfpa.org/en/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-tfgbv-tanzania-detailed-report> all monitoring phases in both countries, regardless of whether the period

of harmful content across every monitoring phase in both countries, regardless of whether the period in question was defined as pre-election, election, or post-election. This consistency indicates that hostility is woven into the everyday digital environment that WIPs and WHRDs must navigate to do their work, rather than being a series of isolated incidents provoked by specific events.

The findings also demonstrate that electoral periods function as risk amplifiers rather than merely as moments of heightened political contestation. In Tanzania, the volume of posts nearly tripled during the election period relative to the pre-election baseline, and the largest single-day spikes in negative sentiment clustered immediately before the vote. In Côte d'Ivoire, a comparable surge accompanied the presidential and legislative elections. What is most instructive, however, is not simply that abuse increased in volume but that it changed in character: campaign hashtags such as #OktobaTunatiki in Tanzania and unity-themed hashtags such as **#MyCôte** and **#CivSolidaire** in Côte d'Ivoire, originally designed as tools of political mobilization or national cohesion, were appropriated as vehicles for gendered hostility. This appropriation illustrates that the same digital infrastructure that enables women's political participation and that the sector actively encourages them to use is also the infrastructure most readily weaponized against them. Civic and political communication cannot, in practice, be separated from the risk of gendered attack, thereby making the electoral calendar itself a predictable map of heightened danger.⁵²

A recurring theme across both country contexts, and one that echoes findings from earlier research work⁵³ on OGBV against women journalists and human rights defenders elsewhere on the continent, is that abuse targets identity rather than substance. FGD participants in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire described being mocked for their bodies, marital status, reproductive roles, and minor speech errors far more often than being engaged on their manifestos or policy positions.

Attacks were also intersectional and demographically calibrated: parental status and age were used in Tanzania, and each described distinct lines of ridicule tailored to their profiles, while participants in Côte d'Ivoire linked hostility toward women in leadership to enduring beliefs that a woman's proper place is domestic. This pattern recurs across such different political and linguistic contexts and aligns with patterns documented among women journalists and WHRDs in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, and Uganda, suggesting that OGBV

⁵² Michalko, J., & Rodriguez, D. J. T. (2026, June 24). Online violence against women in politics: what shapes political party responses to technology-facilitated gender-based violence? ODI: Think Change. <https://odi.org/en/publications/online-violence-against-women-in-politics-what-shapes-political-party-responses-to-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence/>

⁵³ Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire and Sandra Nabulega August 2020

in African digital spaces is best understood as a regional expression of patriarchal gender norms rather than a by-product of any single country's political culture or electoral system.⁵⁴

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence as a vector of abuse represents a qualitative leap beyond the forms of OGBV documented in prior research. Participants in both countries described AI-generated and manipulated content, such as deepfakes and doctored imagery, fabricated coup footage, and sexualized composite images, as tools that inflict harm disproportionate to the effort required to produce them. This content is permanently online and may be republished at any time, even after it has been removed or corrected, and its psychological and reputational effects extend beyond the particular electoral or political moment that prompted it. The structural asymmetry between the speed, scale, and persistence with which AI-generated synthetic content can be created and disseminated, and the comparatively slow processes of verification, moderation, removal, and legal redress, means that advances in generative AI are widening, rather than narrowing, the gap between the harm inflicted on victims and the remedies available to them.⁵⁵

These combined dynamics affect women beyond those who are individually targeted. The psychological toll described by participants in both countries, ranging from declines in confidence and self-esteem to the need for sustained mental health support lasting weeks or months, is compounded by reputational harm that outlives any single incident and by a documented pattern of self-censorship, platform withdrawal, and outright exit from public life. Because the harassment of visible women is itself visible to those who might follow them into political or advocacy careers, and because impunity for perpetrators remains close to total, OGBV functions as a systemic mechanism of exclusion that discourages not only current WIPs and WHRDs from remaining engaged but also discourages future entrants from stepping into public life at all. This phenomenon has implications not merely for the individual women concerned but for the quality and representativeness of democratic participation in both countries.

In conclusion, this research confirms that OGBV against WIPs and WHRDs in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire follows a predictable arc across the electoral cycle: it intensifies in the lead-up to elections, changes character during campaigns to absorb explicitly political and often coordinated elements, and persists after elections in an altered, sometimes diminished but never fully resolved form.

⁵⁴ Technology-facilitated violence against women: Taking stock of evidence and data collection. (2024, September 19). UN Women Knowledge Portal. <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/04/technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-taking-stock-of-evidence-and-data-collection>

⁵⁵ Jacobsen, B. N., & Simpson, J. (2023). The tensions of deepfakes. *Information Communication & Society*, 27(6), 1095–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/136predictable rather than random, protective>

This arc matters most for what it implies about the timing of protective interventions. Because the escalation is patterned and anticipatable rather than random, protective measures, whether legal, technological, institutional, or organizational, must be designed to activate ahead of and throughout the electoral cycle, rather than being assembled reactively once harm has already accumulated. Closing the gap between the predictability of this pattern and the current absence of anticipatory protection is the central challenge that emerges from this study.

Study Limitations

This study was not without limitations. One limitation of the study is that the qualitative data did not cover participants' experiences across all three electoral phases. The focus group discussions were conducted during the pre-election period, meaning that most of the insights reflected experiences and perceptions before elections. Consequently the election and post election phases were primarily examined through the quantitative data obtained through data scrapping with limited qualitative evidence to contextualize participants' lived experiences during these periods. Future research could adopt a longitudinal qualitative design by conducting interviews at every stage of the electoral cycle to enable researchers to capture changes in participants' experiences over time and complement quantitative data.

The other limitation was that it was challenging to study WHRDs and WIPs at the same time, as their harassment online was harder to recognize precisely because it did not map onto an electoral contest in the way attacks on candidates did. Aggregate quantitative classifications, which treat WIPs and WHRDs as a single sample, do not capture this distinction, and so interventions designed around electoral cycles risk overlooking WHRDs, whose exposure is quieter but no less damaging.

The other limitation was on the zero-shot classification utilized in the study, which enables systematic analysis without bespoke training data. Its major flaw is its possibility to misclassify nuanced or culturally specific abuse in Swahili and French. Translating this content into English before analysis could have diluted local gender idioms and insults.

Recommendations

To Electoral Management Bodies and Government Bodies

Electoral commissions and government bodies should incorporate explicit provisions for the digital safety of women candidates and WHRDs into election planning, given the demonstrated and recurring pattern of escalating OGBV during the nomination, campaign, and results periods in both countries. General cybercrime legislation, as observed in this and prior research, is rarely written with gendered online harm in mind and should be reviewed and, where necessary, amended to name and specifically address OGBV, including AI-generated non-consensual imagery, doxxing, and coordinated harassment campaigns targeting women in public life.

The government should also recognize that measures such as internet shutdowns and platform-level account restrictions, even when framed as responses to unrest or misinformation, can themselves become vectors of gendered digital exclusion when they disproportionately silence outspoken women, politicians, and activists. Any restriction of connectivity or platform access around elections should be subject to independent oversight and proportionality review, with particular attention to whether such measures are being used, intentionally or not, to remove critical women's voices from public discourse rather than to address the harms they are ostensibly designed to prevent.

Dedicated, adequately resourced reporting channels for OGBV should be established within existing gender-based violence response infrastructure, staffed by personnel trained specifically in digital harms rather than relying on general-purpose helplines or informal, improvised support arrangements of the kind documented in Côte d'Ivoire during this study.

To Social Media and Technology Companies

Platforms should invest in moderation capacity in Swahili, French, and other locally relevant languages, given that the translation step required for this study's own analysis reflects a broader dependency that likely limits platforms' own ability to detect and act on abusive content in these languages at scale.

Companies should develop and resource proactive detection systems for coordinated inauthentic activity clustered around election-related hashtags, rather than relying solely on individual, complaint-driven reporting, since this study found that hostile activity often organizes around specific hashtags and involves accounts operating in a coordinated or repeated fashion.

Given the documented use of deepfakes, doctored images, and fabricated footage against WIPs and WHRDs in both countries, platforms should establish clear, rapid-response protocols for the removal of AI-generated non-consensual sexual imagery and synthetic disinformation content targeting women in public life, recognizing the structural asymmetry between how quickly such content spreads and how slowly it is currently addressed.

Platforms should also publish transparent reporting on government requests to restrict or remove accounts, particularly where those requests affect journalists, politicians, and human rights defenders, so that restrictions imposed in the name of public order can be distinguished from, and are not mistaken for, protection against OGBV.

To Political Parties

Political parties should adopt and enforce codes of conduct for campaign communication that explicitly discourage the use of party hashtags and messaging as vehicles for gendered attacks on opposing candidates, given this study's finding that campaign hashtags were readily appropriated for hostile, gendered content in both countries.

Parties should establish structured psychosocial and legal support for women candidates, elected officials, and staff who experience TFGBV in the course of their work, addressing the current absence of such support beyond the informal, individually improvised coping strategies described by participants.

To Women's Rights Organizations and Civil Society

Civil society organizations should sustain and expand cross-country, full-electoral-cycle monitoring of the kind conducted in this study, since the value of the findings presented here derives specifically from tracking the pre-election, election, and post-election phases together rather than examining any single phase in isolation. Extending this monitoring to future election cycles and additional countries would strengthen the evidence base needed to anticipate, rather than react to, the escalation of OGBV around elections.

Organizations should formalize and resource psychosocial support services for WIPs and WHRDs affected by OGBV, building on the informal support mechanisms that participants in this study relied on, and should invest in training to help WIPs and WHRDs document and report incidents of OGBV, given the very low rate of formal reporting observed in this study. Regional and continental civil society networks should advocate collectively for treating internet shutdowns and politically motivated platform restrictions targeting women's public voices as a distinct and documentable form of state-enabled digital exclusion, warranting the same advocacy attention as other forms of OGBV addressed in this report.

To Donors and the International Community

Donors should fund longitudinal, multi-country monitoring of OGBV across full electoral cycles, given the demonstrated analytical value of temporal, cross-phase data over single-moment assessments, and should support the continued development of sentiment, emotion, and OGBV classification tools in Swahili, French, and other locally relevant languages to reduce researchers' current reliance on translation and improve the timeliness and accuracy of future monitoring.

International actors engaging with governments on digital rights and internet governance should treat the protection of women's political participation as a core consideration in dialogue on internet shutdowns, platform regulation, and cybercrime legislation, recognizing, as this study demonstrates, that these ostensibly gender-neutral policy domains carry direct and measurable consequences for women's safety and participation in public life.

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