

AMPLIFIED ABUSE

Report on Online Violence Against Women in the
2021 Uganda General Election



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Abbreviations

ACDEG	African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance
ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
ANT	Alliance for National Transformation
API	Application Programming Interface
DP	Democratic Party
EU EOM	European Union Election Observation Mission
EPU	Ecological Party of Uganda
FDC	The Forum for Democratic Change
ICCPR	International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights
JEEMA	Justice Forum
LEGCO	Uganda Legislative Council
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/questioning, Intersexed, Asexual/ally
ML	Machine Learning
MP	Member of Parliament
NDI	The National Democratic Institute
NRM	National Resistance Movement
NUP	National Unity Platform
OGBV	Online Gender-Based Violence
OVAW-P	Online Violence Against Women in Politics
UCC	Uganda Communication Commission
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force
UPC	Uganda People's Congress
UPF	Uganda Police Force
UWOPA	Uganda Parliamentary Women's Association
VAW	Violence Against Women
VAW-P	Violence Against Women in Politics

Contents

1	Executive summary
3	Background
15	Methodology
23	Data Analysis
39	Discussion
43	Conclusion
45	Appendix
50	References

Executive Summary

The growth of internet users has brought about social and economic benefits on a global scale. However, significant harms such as online violence, disinformation, and hate speech have also proliferated in these online spaces.

Discriminatory gendered practices are shaped by social, economic, cultural, and political structures in the physical world and are similarly reproduced online across digital platforms. Uganda, too, has experienced rising rates of online harassment targeting both women in public life as well as everyday users.

Online violence manifests during periods of political activity, and, when directed at women in public life and political discourse, is an example of Violence Against Women in Politics (VAW-P) (NDI, 2019). It is, therefore, referred to as Online Violence Against Women in Politics (OVAW-P).

In order to understand how this report sought to identify and analyze the scale of online violence targeted at women political candidates and high-profile individuals during the January 2021 General Election in Uganda. The report also sought to determine how this online harassment might impact their use of social media platforms for political activity during the elections.

For this purpose, we identified and monitored the accounts of 152 nominated candidates and 50 high-profile individuals during the campaign and election period on the two most widely used public platforms, Facebook and Twitter.

Methodologies used include lexicon building focus group discussions, data scraping of publicly available profiles, qualitative data analysis, and development of a Machine Learning (ML) model to identify and tag instances of OVAW-P in both English and Luganda.

Key findings from this analysis are documented below:

1

The use of social media platforms for engaging with voters and constituents by women politicians remains low in Uganda. On Twitter, men candidates generated twice as many tweets averaging 31 total tweets and replies per account during December compared to their women counterparts at 14.

2

Women politicians in Uganda prefer using Facebook compared to Twitter for engaging with voters. Sixty-eight percent of women's Facebook accounts monitored were used at least once a week during the campaigns compared to 50 percent of men's Facebook accounts.

3

Women politicians were more likely to experience OVAW-P on Twitter as compared to Facebook.

4

Men and women experience online violence differently. Women are more likely to experience trolling, sexual violence, and body shaming. Men are more likely to experience hate speech and satirical comments. Eighteen percent of the accounts belonging to women experienced sexual violence compared to 8 percent of those belonging to men.

5

Whereas both men and women used online tools for engagement, greater online activity was linked with higher levels of online violence for women as opposed to men.

6

The common and categories of OVAW-P experienced included but were not limited to trolling, insults, body shaming, sexualised, and gendered abuse.

Background



Background


African women remain grossly underrepresented in formal political structures and processes (Iwilade, 2011). During the 2016 general election in Uganda, only 1 percent (87 of the 8,793) directly elected council positions in local government were won by women candidates. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), only 23.6 percent of parliamentarians in Africa are women (IPU, 2018). Women's representation in executive or ministerial positions is even lower than in parliaments, where women held 19.7 percent of ministerial posts in 2017 (IPU, 2017).

Some of the reasons for the low representation of women in active politics include lower literacy levels, intimidation from families/communities, religious norms, limited financial resources for campaigning, and an absence of a focus on gender equality in leadership. Women face undue disadvantage due to literacy levels, access to resources, disability and ability, tribal grounds, patriarchy, cultural and traditional norms that question their political prowess and leadership. Most notably, a key hindrance to women's participation in politics is violence.

According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI), violence against women in public life and politics (VAW-P) is violence that targets women because of their gender, in order to discourage them from being or becoming politically active.

This type of violence extends beyond formal political spaces and affects any woman attempting to exercise their political rights as voters, policymakers, activists, etc. (NDI, 2016). VAW-P can be categorised into psychological, sexual, physical, and economic forms.¹ Krook & Restrepo Sanín (2019) theorized an additional form of violence based on emerging trends: semiotic or symbolic violence which is perpetrated through degrading images and sexist language (Krook, 2019). Krook (2020) states that unlike other forms of VAW-P, semiotic violence is less about attacking women directly, than it is about shaping public perceptions about the validity of women's political participation more broadly. While political violence can affect men and women alike, VAW-P is a different and specific issue outside of political violence because of its three distinct characteristics. It targets women specifically because of their gender and is gendered and exemplified by sexist threats and sexual violence (NDI, 2016). Lastly, the aim of VAW-P is to exclude and discourage women from political participation (NDI, 2016). As a result, NDI's overarching definition of violence against women in politics always presents women as political, not the violence. This definition aligns with Ms. Dubravka Šimonović's, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, stance on VAW-P as stated in her address to the report to the UN General Assembly in October 2018:

¹See appendix for definitions.



11. Men and women can both experience violence in politics. Such acts of violence against women, however, target them because of their gender and take gender-based forms, such as sexist threats or sexual harassment and violence. Their aim is to discourage women from being politically active and exercising their human rights and to influence, restrict or prevent the political participation of individual women and women as a group.

12. Such violence, including in and beyond elections, consists of any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately (UN General Assembly, 2018).

●

CASE STUDY

In 2015, the Ugandan police stripped and beat Zaina Fatuma, a leading opposition party member, at a political rally (Monitor UG, 2015). Fatuma, who was a member of the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), had her clothes pulled off her body as she was dragged down the side of the road (Paulat, 2015). This case is a great example of the key distinction between political violence and VAW-P. While all members of the opposition party at the rally were targeted with violence because of their political affiliation, the violence enacted against Fatuma was gendered in:

- i. Its target: Zaina Fatuma is a woman
- ii. Its form: Zaina was treated differently from other targets, and was the only one who was stripped and essentialized to her body. She was also stripped as a way of embarrassing her in front of her male colleagues.
- iii. Its impact: The attack on Zaina sent a message to women in Uganda as it was an example of what could happen to women who supported and took part in activities organized by opposition parties.

In addition, when denying harassing Zaina, James Baba, the then Minister of State for Internal Affairs alleged that she took off her clothes as a way of using nudity to make a political statement (Butty, 2015). In this case, he tapped into an age-old cultural practice by (some) African women practise and weaponised it against her.

Instances of VAW-P in Africa

The use of violence as a tool to suppress, intimidate and exclude women from politics is rampant on the continent and yields extreme effects. A clear case of this was in Malawi where of the 425 women who ran for political office in 2009, 225 quit before the elections were over “mainly because of harassment and intimidation” (Semu-Banda, 2008). Women who stand for office have experienced sexism and discrimination, ranging from snide remarks about their appearance to being propositioned by their male colleagues (Nyabola, 2016, p. 13.). An instance of this was in 2017 when Samantha Maina, an aspirant in the general elections in Kenya, was taken aback by comments from potential voters suggesting that her hair, which she often wears natural, looked “unprofessional” and not politician-like (Griffin, 2017).

It is important to note that VAW-P is not only inflicted by anonymous supporters of opposing political parties, but also by members of the

same political parties female politicians belong to (IPU, 2016). In Kenya, Berry, Bouka, & Kamuru (2017) found that women politicians were often verbally and physically assaulted by their colleagues in government offices or legislative chambers for voicing unpopular opinions or refusing to capitulate to male colleagues’ demands. Political parties are often patriarchal and insufficiently institutionalised for women to challenge rules that exclude them (Goetz, 2002). This is simply because there are often no firm rules and rights, only patronage systems and favours (Goetz, 2002). These favors could even be sexual, as is the case in Tanzania where women get solicited for sexual favors in exchange for political positions (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 746). As a result, women face political isolation, and even violence for not following party lines drawn by male party members and leaders (UN Women, 2014). Furthermore, women voters’ effective participation in political party activities ends up limited due to the nature of operations and exercise of power.

CASE STUDY

In 2016, Nairobi Member of County Assembly, Elizabeth Manyala was assaulted and injured by her colleague Elias Otieno for refusing to reallocate money meant for the women’s caucus fund to one of his pet projects. As a result, she was hospitalized with extensive head and neck injuries. Despite the police arresting Elias, he was never prosecuted for his actions. Elizabeth was instead blamed by her political party and female supporters for the fight (Berry, Bouka, & Kamuru, 2017).

Despite the availability of myriads of accounts, VAW-P is still an understudied phenomenon as researchers have found that it is dismissed as the “cost of doing politics”(Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 746). Generally, documenting VAW is difficult because women are reluctant to report cases because of shame, stigma, fear of retaliation, and perceived impunity for perpetrators (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman 2014). Silence is seen as a strategic decision by victims, as they believe that

publicizing their experiences is political suicide; as it reflects badly upon themselves, and not their perpetrators (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 746). Publicizing their experiences also attracts claims that they are “hysterical” and can not cope with the demands of political work (NDI, 2016). When women in politics are seen as victims, then society justifies claims that women do not belong in political life (NDI, 2016).

Online Violence Against Women in Politics

VAW-P is not just an offline phenomenon but also extends to online spaces. Research has found that women in public-facing positions like journalists and politicians experience a disproportionate amount of online gender-based violence (OGBV) (Web Foundation, 2020). OGBV is commonly defined as an action facilitated by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms and is carried out using the internet or mobile technology (Pollicy, 2020). It is intended to reinforce existing patterns of power and dominance over people who have historically been disenfranchised or oppressed (Poland, 2016). OGBV against women politicians is referred to as Online Violence against Women in Politics (OVAW-P).

Online spaces have been important in helping women and other marginalized groups to overcome barriers to becoming politically active, thereby broadening the inclusive and participatory nature of democracy (NDI, 2019). Globally, women politicians have reported finding social media extremely useful to connect with the electorate and push their messages without traditional media's intermediation (Di Meco, 2019). This is important because traditional media often presents an obstacle for women's political ambitions, as the coverage women in politics receive is still often biased against them, both in quantity and in quality (Di Meco, 2019). In 2020 particularly, politicians leveraged online spaces for political engagement as countries locked down and imposed COVID-19 restrictions on physical gatherings that restricted a huge part of women's efforts bargains on physical mobilisation and organising. However, the digital world provides a forum where violence can proliferate with impunity (I Know Politics, 2020). It has also become a forum for disinformation, hate speech, abuse, and harassment targeting politically active women (NDI, 2019).

African women in politics have experienced forms of OVAW-P such as offensive name-calling; sexual harassment; stalking; threats of violence, rape, or death; impersonation through the use of fake and parody accounts; Non-Consensual Intimate Image sharing (NCII); doxxing, etc. In Zimbabwe, a study by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) found that from 2013 to April 2018, 60 percent of abusive and violent online discourse around political actors was directed at women in politics, despite women constituting a third of the National Assembly.

Like VAW-P, OVAW-P is anchored in gender and sexual norms, as women are attacked for flouting expectations for how they should behave and judged on how they present themselves or appear online (Orembo & Gichanga, 2020). Women's bodies remain politicized and instrumentalized in a bid to curtail their political rights. They also often face an impossible dichotomy - they are harassed when they identify or are categorized by others as sexual beings, but are also sexualised against their will at the same time. The media amplifies this focus on women's bodies and sexuality as they tend to focus on the way women are dressed, their physique, body image, and family life, and pay much less attention to their ideas, policies, and proposals (Di Meco, 2019).

CASE STUDY

Jennifer Semakula Musisi is a Ugandan lawyer and public administrator who served as the first Executive Director of the Kampala Capital City Authority. Her body was often sexualised by social media users and the media. Media houses amplified this sexualization by running stories on her work but shifting the focus on her body. For instance, a blog ran a story about her resignation from the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCAA) with the title “Hips, Swag, Pomp and the side of Jennifer Musisi you will definitely miss” (Taremwa, 2018). A story about her participation in the Makerere University marathon was titled “Makerere Runners To View Jennifer Musisi’s Booty In HD” (Mujuni, 2017). She was also featured on a list titled “Battle of the buttocks: Who has the biggest pair in Uganda?” (Matooke Republic, 2017).

During election periods, all forms of OVAW-P are amplified - including sexual threats and harassment. Comments on videos published online featuring female political candidates frequently feature sexually aggressive language (Ward, 2019). Women politicians who present non-conforming behaviour frequently become the focus of abuse. For example, trolling uses language and insults that are highly gendered – misogynist or anti-gay rhetoric, threats of rape, etc. (Brown & Pytlak, 2020). Non-conforming behaviour often deviating from traditional gender norms through sexual orientation or gender identity, choice of profession, physical appearance, commitment to gender equality, lifestyle, athletic or intellectual ability, or religious and/ political views, etc (Brown & Pytlak, 2020). Women may also be attacked or criticized for deviating from norms that associate men and masculine traits with leadership and political power, or for being too masculine / “acting like a man.” Some of the inferences dictate that men are the head and women beneath them on the social ladder and therefore are not in a position to lead and engage in politics; these references from religion, in this case, include ancient texts such as The Bible and The Quran.

When attacks against politically active women are channeled online, the impact is amplified. Women are targeted specifically across multiple platforms (Web Foundation, 2020). Additionally, these attacks often employ malignant creativity—the use of coded language; iterative, context-based visual and textual memes; and other tactics to avoid detection on social media platforms (Wilson Center, 2021). For instance, abusers often send threats with deliberate typos to avoid detection by algorithms (Web Foundation, 2020). The expansive reach of social media platforms magnifies the effects of psychological abuse by making those effects seem anonymous, borderless, and sustained, hence undermining women’s sense of personal security in ways not experienced by men (NDI, 2019). The volume of OVAW-P also increases as content goes viral. Political women may be especially vulnerable to these viral moments due to sensationalism of perceived breach of social norms (IFES, 2018). Ultimately, OVAW-P creates a hostile environment that pushes women to censor themselves online by avoiding certain topics, softening their opinions, limiting their participation, and even opting out of platforms altogether (Sobieraj, 2020).



Use of Political Disinformation

Disinformation is false or misleading information that is shared knowingly to cause harm. Misinformation, on the other hand, is false information shared without necessarily intending to deceive. Disinformation campaigns involve the deliberate sharing and spreading of false information in order to achieve a desired goal or influence a situation (Brown & Pytlak, 2020). While disinformation has always been a part of political campaigning, digital technologies afford the possibility to precisely profile millions of citizens and to micro-target each one with highly tailored disinformation messaging (Roberts, 2021). Disinformation is also used to manipulate public opinion on important policy issues such as vaccines, climate change, immigration, agriculture, and education (Roberts, 2021). Disinformation campaigns can also be amplified by non-political actors - such as media or the general public - who re-share content they believe to be true without the explicit attempt to share false or misleading information. This amplification, however, still has the impact of compromising the information environment and advancing gendered attacks against women online (Judson et al., 2020).

African governments and political actors are also increasingly relying on online disinformation to manipulate public opinion. For instance, in the 2017 General Election in Kenya, politicians allegedly spent US\$20m on politically motivated fake news (Brown, 2019).



Disinformation is also used to manipulate public opinion on important policy issues such as vaccines, climate change, immigration, agriculture, and education (Roberts, 2021).

In Uganda, an investigation by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRL) found that a network of Public Relations (PR) firms, news organizations, and inauthentic social media accounts engaged in a coordinated campaign using fake and duplicate accounts to manage social media pages, comment on other people's content, impersonate users, and re-share posts in groups to make them appear more popular than they were. It is also worth noting that governments weaponise fake news to curtail political freedoms. Uganda, for instance, introduced its social media tax in a bid to curb what they referred to as "online gossip" (Dahir, 2021). Additionally, there was evidence that in the 2021 elections, there was significant coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) to influence and distort online conversation (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung; African Institute for Investigative Journalism, 2021)

Gendered Disinformation against African Women In Politics

When disinformation campaigns are used against women in politics, they typically reinforce highly gendered stereotypes and norms including focusing on the way women are dressed, their body image, their sexuality, and their family life (Brown & Pytlak, 2020). As a result of the gendered nature of these campaigns, this phenomenon is referred to as gendered disinformation. Gendered disinformation can involve the spreading of rumors or alleged “facts,” often of a sexual nature, in order to humiliate, discredit, or disempower the subjects (Wilson Center, 2021). In patriarchal societies, stories (doctored or not) about women politicians’ marriages or lack thereof, sexuality, and sexual histories are powerful narratives that can be used to discredit them. When such stories are shared, they become sensationalized and attract dogpiling (when a group of people floods the comment section of someone’s post to insult, bully, threaten, and humiliate them) (GBVNet, 2020). Gendered and sexualised disinformation is a subset of online gendered abuse aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere (Wilson Center, 2021). It seeks impact primarily at the political level, but can also cause serious harm at the personal level (Judson et al, 2020). Armies of politically motivated trolls and bots are often amplifying the scale of the online violence targeted at women politicians (Di Meco, 2019). Sexualised distortion in the form of the non-consensual sharing of real, faked, or doctored sex tapes or nude images of women politicians is also a powerful weapon to exploit female sexuality and undermine political opponents. A 2016 IPU survey of 55 women legislators worldwide found that 81.8 percent of the respondents had experienced psychological online gender-based violence, including high incidences of humiliating fake sexual images having been circulated (IPU, 2016). Another survey of women parliamentarians from all over the world found that 41.8 per cent of the respondents had seen extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of them spread through social media, including photomontages showing them nude (Di Meco, 2019).

CASE STUDY

In the 2017 general elections in Rwanda, presidential aspirant Diane Rwigara’s campaign was derailed when doctored nude images of her were shared online (Busari & Idowu, 2017). While the ruling party, Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), denied allegations of disseminating the images, Rwigara was trolled and abused online and her campaign was ultimately discredited (Busari & Idowu, 2017).

Effects of Online VAW-P and Gendered Disinformation on Women Politicians

Robust democracies are built on political discourse in which people—including those without power—discuss even the most sensitive topics and share their ideas, experiences, and opinions without fear (Sobieraj, 2019).

Therefore, an internet where all citizens can engage is critical to modern democracy (NDI,

- 2019). Yet, OVAW-P hinders women politicians’ full and equal participation in online spaces. NDI’s 2019 research found that after experiencing OVAW-P, politically active women in Kenya were less willing to continue engaging on social media, with 20 percent of Kenyan respondents pausing their social media activity in response.

Furthermore, threats of violence have economic costs, as women are forced to hire private security and invest in safety gear like stab-proof vests (Web Foundation, 2020). OVAW-P can also cost

women politicians their careers as it pushes them to leave public positions, close their office to the public, and even affects the kind of laws they can table in parliament. This is especially true if the issues they wish to address are particularly controversial, or their point of view unpopular (Sobieraj, 2019). When women in politics table discussions around topics deemed controversial like the decriminalization of abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights, they face both coordinated and

uncoordinated vitriol online. One such case was in Kenya when Senator Susan Kihika underwent dogpiling under the hashtag **#StopAbortionBill** after she tabled the highly contested Reproductive Healthcare Bill (Githinji, 2020; Lumbasi Daily, 2020). Sometimes, this psychological violence escalates to physical violence in which men seek to make the public sphere so inhospitable for women that they disengage from electoral politics altogether.

CASE STUDY

OVAW-P can also cause psychological distress. This was the case when Ms. Sylvia Rwabwoogo, a Ugandan politician who experienced stalking from a 25-year-old man who inundated her with calls and messages professing his romantic interests in her (Ndagire, 2018). She tried blocking him online but he always found alternative ways to reach her even after being arrested (Ndagire, 2018). While her stalker was charged and found guilty of cyber harassment and offensive communication, Ms. Rwabwoogo recounted undergoing psychological torture from the stalking and even cried while describing her experience in court (Ndagire, 2018). Unfortunately, the media framed this type of harassment as a case where her perpetrator was in love with her. The Daily Monitor ran a story titled “MP weeps in court over love text messages” (Daily Monitor, 2018). Another blog titled “Love-struck College student jailed for love texts to Ugandan MP” mentioned that Ms. Rwabogo’s profile on the Parliament website listed her as single, perhaps exciting her stalker to try out his luck (Ondieki & Ndagire, 2018).

OVAW-P, whether coordinated or uncoordinated, has a stifling effect on women’s participation in democracy as it deters young women, especially ones from marginalised communities, from engaging online (Web Foundation, 2020). Not all women are attacked online, but digital abuse is powerful beyond its individual target. When women see a peer deluged with rape threats, they recognize themselves as potential targets (Sobieraj, 2019). The looming threat of being attacked serves as a cautionary tale—a deterrent—that inhibits other women from speaking freely about social and political issues. Ultimately, the purpose of VAW-P - whether online or in-person - extends beyond the individuals targeted, seeking also to deter other women who might consider engaging in public and political life (NDI, 2021).

Similarly, gendered disinformation has a negative impact on women’s participation in democracy. Disinformation and misinformation are antithetical to a healthy information environment, as elections are only meaningful if the citizenry has adequate information to make informed decisions on their own behalf when they enter the voting booth (Sobieraj, 2019). Disinformation muddies the information environment as rumors and falsehoods can distract constituents, colleagues, and journalists from focusing on issues that women politicians feel are more salient (Sobieraj, 2019). Smear campaigns and fear-mongering can cost women elections as they spend more time and energy trying to fix their reputations in the public eye.



History of Women's Participation in Politics in Uganda

When it comes to Ugandan women's representation in representative politics, Uganda ranks highly on global lists. With a representation of 34.9 percent, Uganda sits at position 37 on the IPU's ranking of the percentage of women in national parliaments (IPU, 2021). However, this has not always been the case. The question of the participation of women in Uganda's politics is one that has been shaped and defined by historical moments like colonial oppression and patriarchal government regimes. In these cases, women were either suppressed or co-opted into male-dominated political structures.

The first Ugandan woman to enter the Legislative Council (LEGCO) was elected in 1954. Yet, in these nationwide LEGCO elections, women were denied the right not only to be voted into political seats, but also to vote based on restrictions such as property, income, and employment prequalifications (1998). As a result, many Ugandan women, who were mostly engaged in unpaid and invisible subsistence work, were disqualified from voting (Akihire, 2004). This notion of women as "minors" when it came to elections and other broader political processes was sustained in the post-independence period until the mid-1980s when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power (Akihire, 2004).



Currently, with affirmative action, Ugandan women politicians are assured of 122 District Women Representative seats, alongside the possibility of vying for other seats.

The increased presence of women in Ugandan politics is often attributed to the broader process of the 1980 to 1986 guerrilla struggle, which drew different categories of the population into direct public participation in different capacities (Mama, 2004). Women worked as caregivers for sick and injured soldiers, as spies who scouted and located enemy positions to determine their strength, and as political organizers (Mama, 2004). Other women were involved in diplomatic work, political negotiations, and peace negotiations (Mama, 2004). This active involvement, together with developments at the international level, made gender balance in public politics and decision-making a legitimate cause (Akihire, 2004).

Currently, with affirmative action, Ugandan women politicians are assured of 122 District Women Representative seats, alongside the possibility of vying for other seats. However, the increase in the number of women in parliament has not necessarily translated into better outcomes for women. The women in power may not have enough political influence, and may not be passionate about women's rights causes (Bosch-Stiftung, 2018). Furthermore, the idea that women can only get into politics through affirmative action seats has been ingrained in society. Kemigisa (2018) writes that "women interested in running for Parliament seats are reminded that the main seat is for men and the 'Woman MP' slot for them".



Technology does not stand still; neither can democracy.

- Kofi Annan

The Ugandan 2021 Scientific Elections

On January 14th, 2021, Uganda held its Presidential Elections, which was commonly referred to as the 'scientific election'. In March 2020, months prior to the election, President Yoweri Museveni imposed a lockdown on the country in a bid to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Determined to go on with the presidential elections despite fears around COVID-19 spread, the electoral commission declared that the elections would be 'scientific'. This meant that campaigning would be done digitally via television, radio, and social media, and not in large physical gatherings as was the norm. Voting, however, would be done in person with social distancing measures in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Despite this directive, in-person gatherings were still held with some erupting into violence as politicians and

supporters were arrested and harassed by the police. On November 18th, 2020, 50 Ugandans lost their lives at the hands of the police during protests after the arrest of the presidential candidate, Robert Kyagulanyi alias Bobi Wine (Daily Monitor, 2020).

Against this backdrop, women suffered harassment, intimidation, and violence as they campaigned for positions or showed support for candidates. One political party supporter, Ritah Nabukenya, lost her life after a truck belonging to Uganda Police ran over her, as she was possibly targeted for showing support for the People Power political movement by wearing party regalia (Daily Monitor, 2020). Nancy Kalembe, who was the only woman presidential candidate amongst 11, reported intimidation as she kept receiving calls from senior government officials urging her to drop her candidacy (Daily Monitor, 2020).

Another candidate and activist, Stella Nyanzi, fled Uganda and went into exile in Kenya after threats against her life became serious when her partner was arrested and tortured (Peralta, 2021)

The switch to online campaigning and voter engagement could have made it safer for women to campaign and reach out to voters as it could have reduced the physical risk of VAW-P. However, it created new challenges for women voters and candidates, notably the poor internet infrastructure and data laws. For example, obtaining airtime on television or radio in many countries requires contacts and substantial resources, which would not be available to women and particularly to political newcomers (Brechenmacher & Hubbard, 2020).

Furthermore, online campaigning could have hindered both women politicians and supporters from campaigning and engaging with political content online because of the digital gender divide. Internet penetration in Uganda stands at

only 50 percent, with men being 43 percent more likely to be online (Web Foundation, 2020b; Pollicy, 2020). Internet use in Uganda is also hampered by high data costs, a social media tax, and more recently, politically motivated internet shutdowns. For women, this is amplified by the lack of digital skills needed to navigate online spaces and the gender pay gap which affects their ability to afford data.

In 2020, Uganda's digital information environment was also muddied with misinformation and disinformation fuelled by the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic and the looming presidential elections. In one instance, a Facebook post claiming that the Uganda Electoral Commission had rescheduled upcoming presidential elections surfaced on 12th January 2021. The post had two screenshots of

tweets purportedly published by the Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Health, both claiming that the polling date had been moved in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (PesaCheck, 2021).

On 13th January 2021, a day before the general elections, Uganda Communication Commission ordered telecom operators and internet service providers to suspend all services until further notice. Internet services were restored 5 days later, however, internet speeds remained slow and inconsistent for several weeks after. On 16th January 2021, incumbent Yoweri Museveni was declared winner of the presidential election with 59 percent of the votes. He was sworn in for a 6th term on 12th May 2021.

Methodology



Methodology

The study utilised both qualitative and quantitative data gathered from existing literature, two social media platforms; Facebook and Twitter, and from lexicon building focus group discussions organized with key stakeholders involved in the digital rights and data governance space in Uganda.

Research questions

The main objective of this study was to assess the impact of OVAW-P in Uganda and determine how it might impact Ugandan women in politics' use of digital solutions and social media platforms for expression and participation in the elections.

The following research questions were used as a guide towards achieving this research objective:

1

How do women politicians in Uganda use social media platforms for campaigning during the scientific general elections?

2

How does the use of social media platforms differ amongst men and women candidates?

3

What evidence of OVAW-P exists on social media platforms and how does it manifest?

4

What is the association between OVAW-P and factors such as gender, age, political party affiliation, frequency of social media use, and electoral results?

Time Frame

The data for this study were collected between December 1 to January 30, 2021. This period reflects a time period of 6 weeks prior and 2 weeks after the Uganda General Elections held on January 14th, 2021.

Sample Size Determination and Account Selection

In order to determine a significant sample size to use for the study, the Cochran sample size determination formula was used (Cochran, 1977). This formula produces an ideal sample size attached to the desired levels of precision and confidence. This formula is particularly appropriate in situations with large populations and can also be reduced if the whole population is relatively small.

The Cochran sample size determination formula (with a 95 percent confidence interval, 50 percent as the proportion of the population active on social media, and a 5 percent margin of error) gave us a sample size of 385, which we modified for a small population (i.e. 2667, the total number of nominated candidates). This resulted in a final sample size of 336 aspirants.

The activity of politicians, especially women politicians, on social media platforms was determined to be too low to meet our sample size of 336. All accounts that had been used in campaigning for the 2021 general elections were identified, and from these, all the accounts with

at least one comment on their posts were entered into the sample. In order to reach a representative sample for both men and women, active accounts of women councilors and mayoral candidates were included in the sample, because active accounts for nominated women MP candidates were few. The research team was able to identify a total of 152 accounts (76 men, 76 women).

The selection of accounts was conducted through a search of social media platforms to identify accounts or profiles with names similar to those on the list of nominated candidates as obtained from Uganda's electoral commission. Popular accounts of government institutions, newspapers and television stations were also relied upon and the research team searched through their follower or friends lists to identify accounts. Once these were identified, the content posted on the accounts, profile pictures, and profile descriptions were analyzed to verify their legitimacy. Accounts were selected on the basis of available and active social media accounts that had comments on their posts, irrespective of age, party affiliation, or election outcome. Data on these characteristics were obtained and included in our analysis.

To supplement the 152 accounts, an additional 50 accounts of high-profile individuals including popular social media influencers, journalists and media personnel, and appointed government ministers were also identified. These accounts were selected on the basis of gender, influence, and expressiveness on political issues (25 men and 25 women).

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected from all 202 accounts identified on both social media platforms. Data from Twitter was obtained through Twitter's public Application Programming Interface (API) that allows access to all publicly available data including account handle, account name, reply, retweet counts, like counts, tweet date, etc. Data from Facebook was obtained through web scraping tools, namely Instant Data Scraper and Python designed specifically for this purpose. Researchers were unable to gain access to CrowdTangle for the more sophisticated data collection on Facebook, which resulted in the use of more manual processes for data scraping. Data from both posts and comments were collected and used to create a dataset of user name, comment, account commented on, post ID, and the date when the comment was posted. The analysis relied on multivariate statistical techniques and network analysis to identify patterns as well as evaluate user behavior and assess potential coordination.

Lexicon Based Approach Sentiment Analysis to Studying Violence Against Women in Politics

To study online harms like hate speech, online violence, and gendered disinformation, one method that can be used is sentiment analysis. NDI has previously used sentiment analysis in studies of OVAW-P and gendered disinformation in countries like Kenya, Colombia, Indonesia, Poland, and the Philippines (NDI, 2019; Judson et al, 2020).

To study these phenomena, NDI collaborated with local experts and developed lexicons on gendered hate speech and the political language of the moment, in order to examine the online violence experienced by politically active women. The typology and lexicons developed during participatory in-country workshops with women's rights organizations and civic technology civil society partners were then utilized to conduct a robust scraping and analysis of online violence using data from Twitter. The Twitter data analysis focuses on Twitter activity in a six-month window surrounding a significant political event in each country focusing on the accounts of young, politically active women (NDI, 2019).

Lexicon Development

In order to filter and label keywords from the data collected during the social media monitoring exercise, a gendered lexicon was developed during a workshop with in-country experts from advocacy organizations. This physical workshop, which observed all the necessary COVID-19 measurements and protocols, took place after the general elections at the Pollicy offices on February 23rd, 2021 in Kampala, Uganda. These organizations included: Women of Uganda Network, Gender Initiative Tech, Aydia Gender Tech, Digital Woman Uganda, Her Internet, and Quin Abenakyo Foundation, whose key insights have been added in this report. During the gendered lexicon building workshop, emphasis was laid on including words from local languages as well as common words that are not necessarily negative but are being used in a negative way through creative malice. This gendered lexicon was also supplemented with vocabulary obtained from *Hatebase* (hatebase.org), an online repository of structured, multilingual, usage-based hate speech.

Literature Review and Qualitative Data Collection

The research team deemed it necessary to supplement the quantitative data with a compilation of information from already existing literature on the subject. Qualitative data was also collected through brief interviews with individuals during the lexicon building workshop mentioned above, as well as the analysis of texts from a selected number of online tweets, posts, and comments.

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis is a process of using natural language processing, text analysis, and statistics to understand the sentiment or opinion of a group of texts e.g. a sentence that could be in either a tweet, post, comment or reply on social media. This process helps determine whether a word or

- phrase is negative, positive, or neutral, and serves as a useful method in social media monitoring to gain an overview of public opinion on different topics.

In order to understand the overall opinions and attitudes expressed by social media users towards political candidates and high-profile individuals in Uganda during the 2021 general elections, sentiment analysis was used.

Through sentiment analysis, a reply or comment containing positive words such as *“Excellent. The best choice for Kamuli”* is assigned a positive score, while one containing negative words such as *“Stupid who was there when our constitution was raped may the thunder strike you”* is assigned a negative score and that with neutral words such as *“Does this mean you will do the same?”* is assigned a value of zero.

TEXT	SENTIMENT	SCORE
<i>Excellent. The best choice for Kamuli.</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>>0</i>
<i>Does this mean you will do the same?</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>Stupid who was there when our constitution was raped may the thunder strike you.</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i><0</i>

Although sentiment analysis is a suitable method for extracting sentiments from text, existing tools are built for English text and can only extract these sentiments from English language comments and replies. In addition to this, human judgment is still a more accurate gauge for sentiment extraction since humans can understand the contextual meaning behind a text. They can also catch nuances brought about by sarcasm, irony, and satire, and identify common abbreviations which automated sentiment analysis might not fully comprehend as yet. As a result, a large proportion of the collected data (157,822 comments/replies) categorized as neutral by the automated sentiment analysis tool included negative comments expressed in local Uganda languages. To fully explore these comments, it was deemed necessary to subject all negative and neutral comments to a secondary process of labeling by a team of research assistants to identify miscategorized comments.

In addition to identifying misclassified comments and replies, the research team aimed to identify manifestations of OVAW-P. This labeling process was conducted manually for an initial 50 percent of the data collected and the remaining 50 percent was later labeled using a Machine Learning

model built from the labeled data. The manual labeling was necessary for identifying local language words, nicknames, and sarcastic phrases, and applying context to some of the comments. This ML model was created as there had never been a classification model created to classify a dataset similar to what the research team had generated.

For the manual labeling, the team used the lexicon of keywords generated during the lexicon building workshop. This list was supplemented with a hate speech lexicon obtained from the hatebase.org repository. Each comment was read carefully and conceptualised to determine an appropriate violence type or category to assign to it. Our typology evolved from NDI's typology as presented in previous studies such as the 2019 Tweets that chill study that used “*Insults and hate speech*”, “*Embarrassment and reputational risk*”, “*Physical threats*”, and “*Sexualized distortion*”. We used OGBV terms to conceptualise some of the OVAW-P typologies but this should not in any way mean that the two are the same.

The following categories were identified from the data:

- Sexual Violence:** *Comments referring to one's gender, sexual acts, sexual anatomy, etc.*
- Hate Speech:** *Discriminatory comments targeting a group of people such as a tribe, religion, sexual orientation, etc.*
- Insult:** *Comments that include offensive or rude words.*
- Satire:** *Humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people in the context of contemporary politics.*
- Body Shaming:** *The action or practice of expressing humiliation about another individual's body shape or size.*
- Trolling:** *All other remaining negative and offensive comments.*

Where some of the above categories overlapped, this was catered for during the data analysis.

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

Source: * - NDI, 2019

This manually labeled data was then subjected to deep learning techniques to build the text classification model, described above. Deep learning was used because it performs much better on unstructured data and outperforms other Machine Learning techniques when classifying text.

Sample text	Category
<i>“Just kip sucking museveni’s dick till t chockes u totwasamira” “There’s a saying that when a woman is dense, her private parts suffer the most”</i>	<i>Sexual violence</i>
<i>“That idiot Nsereko should not confuse you all are Tibuhaburwa products plz plz plz NUP mwebeleremu”</i>	<i>Insult and Hate Speech</i>
<i>“Anite with flat butt” “Am only asking myself, what did God give you that big head for????” “Your late! Time up old lady!”</i>	<i>Body shaming</i>
<i>“Your sister Magret Muhanga sold goats and bought UBC land worth billions of shillings”</i>	<i>Satire</i>
<i>“You’ve totally lost relevance”</i>	<i>Trolling</i>

Limitations

Several challenges were observed during the process of implementing the research methodology above that should be considered when conducting a similar project in the future.

De-platforming of Social Media Accounts

Although we had control over which accounts to monitor, there was no control over whether or not these accounts/profiles remained on the platform for the entire monitoring period. During the study, several accounts were deleted and had to be continuously updated with secondary accounts belonging to the individuals. A key example of this was the removal of pro-government accounts on Facebook by Facebook and suspicious Twitter accounts for coordinated attacks in favor of the incumbent President (DFRLab, 2021).

Total Internet Shutdown

The presence of a social media tax of 200 Ugandan Shillings a day along with a five-day total internet shut down (January 14 to January 18, 2021) hindered the usage of the two social media platforms from which the data was being collected. Owing to the sophistication of the shutdown, the use of common circumvention techniques to access the internet was not possible. Internet services were blocked by telecom operators and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) for five days. Even though internet services were made available at the end of this five-day period, social media was only fully restored a month later, with Facebook still remaining blocked as of publishing this report (Kamoga, 2021).

Low Media Usage Amongst Women Political Candidates

There seemed to be very few women in politics who use social media during campaigns as well as share information with the electorate despite its palpable importance during the scientific campaigns. Most of the active accounts belonged to men. This, therefore, affected the representativeness of the study sample. For example, in order to obtain an equal number of women and men on Twitter, accounts belonging to low profile nominated women candidates such as counselors were used. Yet, women in such low-ranking positions are less likely to come up in political discourse and less likely to have harassment/violence/disinformation. This could also explain why men had more comments on Twitter.

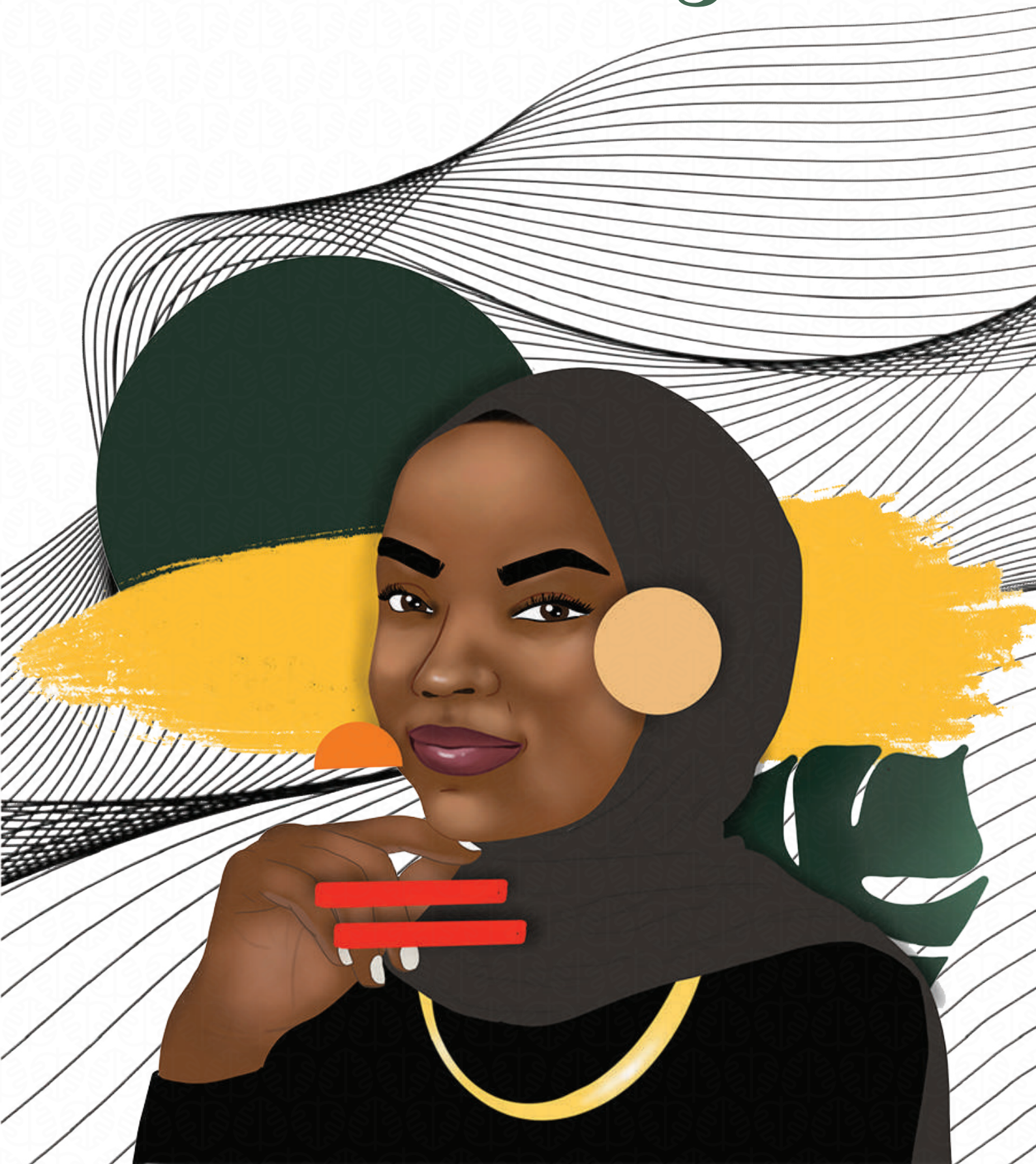
The subjectivity of Manual Labelling of Content

During the manual labeling process, sentences were categorised subjectively based on how an individual would interpret texts. This need for manual labeling was also linked to the lack of tools geared towards contextualizing local languages.

Platform and content choice

The study focused on only Twitter and Facebook, which are the two most widely used open social media platforms in Uganda. The study did not include abuse captured elsewhere or any other forms of online violence not captured in the comments and mentions, which could include private messages or content within closed groups.

Data Analysis



Data Analysis

What evidence of OVAW-P exists on social media platforms and how does it manifest?

Tweet Analysis

As part of our study, we also analysed some interactions with the accounts we were monitoring. We found that women politicians were targeted with sexualised and gendered insults, as well as their political campaigns.

CASE STUDY

Reinforcement of Cultural and/or Patriarchal Norms

In two prominent cases, women politicians were the targets of online violence related to their marital status.

1. Nancy Kalembe, the sole woman presidential candidate in the elections, encountered OVAW-P. Her divorce was weaponized against her, where an old video of her **“failed”** unsuccessful marriage was shared in a bid to derail her campaign. In this case, despite her having moved on and built an accomplished career, her divorce was weaponised against her (Daily Monitor, 2020).
2. When Agness Nanduttu, currently the State Minister for Karamoja Affairs, was contesting for political office, she received comments instructing her to get married, as single women are not deemed capable of leading (The Independent, 2020).

In other instances during the elections, visible women were also singled out and attacked across social media platforms.

During the campaign season, NBS Television, a leading station in Uganda, was accused of being partisan. However, one woman presenter, Mildred Tuhaise, was singled out and targeted with online violence. Online users singled her out and resorted to insults and body shaming. Other presenters did not face as much scrutiny (Pesacheck, 2021).

Beatrice Kayanja, a campaigns agent for presidential candidate Norbert Mao, was accused by her husband of infidelity because of the amount of time she spent with Nobert. Her husband even posted a video asking the presidential candidate to find other women to spend time with. The public joined in and attacked Beatrice, referring to her with derogatory comments (That Celebrity, 2020).

In addition to the above findings on gendered and sexualised comments, we also found that women's experiences online may not necessarily be identical as sometimes attacks are personalised.

CASE STUDY



Gendered Disinformation

A popular case of gendered disinformation was the case of Nabillah Naggayi who had been contesting for Kampala Mayor. Nabillah Naggayi on the other hand faced gendered disinformation and was accused of being a spy or mole representing a different party than that which she contested. Nabillah had previously left FDC for NUP to contest in the Kampala Mayoral elections.

How do women politicians in Uganda use social media platforms for campaigning during scientific general elections?

Use of Social Media Platforms by Political Candidates

Of the 202 accounts (118 on Twitter & 84 on Facebook) monitored during the 2021 General Election period, nine out of every ten (89 percent) accounts posted at least one piece of content during the campaign period. On Twitter, 92 percent of accounts posted at least one piece of content compared to Facebook (86 percent). There was a considerable drop in overall social media usage during the month of January due to the total internet shutdown during the week of the general elections. Tweet and reply volume dropped by 30 percent while post volume on Facebook dropped by 31 percent.

Facebook

All 84 accounts monitored on Facebook displayed a poster or campaign banner as part of the page or account. A large proportion of the women candidates set up or used their Facebook profiles for campaigning. This means that one would need to add the candidate as a Facebook friend to access information and updates. After the election period, some of these accounts remained dormant while others were used as personal accounts.

A few candidates set up a dedicated page for their campaign.

Some candidates also used Facebook Groups as their primary campaign channel.



Some profiles or pages only had an image of the candidate's campaign poster indicating their name, party affiliation, and slogan. These accounts did not post any further relevant information. The use of many of the engagement features offered by Facebook as well as digital media such as images, video, infographics was very low across all accounts monitored.

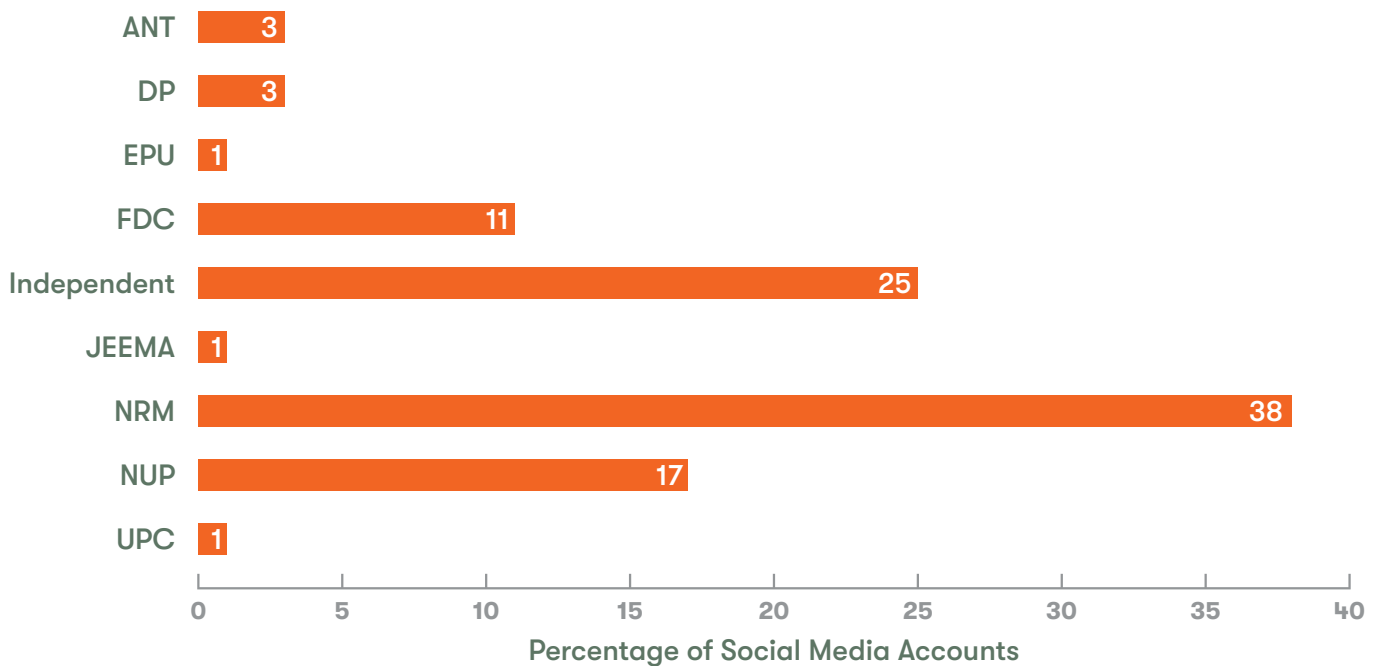
Frequency of Social Media Use

More than one-third of the 76 accounts belonging to nominated women candidates were rarely used to post any campaign or election-related information. However, 49 percent posted multiple times a week, with 20 percent of accounts posting, commenting, or replying at least daily.



Distribution of Social Media Accounts based on Political Affiliation

Women politicians from the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party, the newly formed National Unity Platform (NUP) of singer-turned-politician Robert Kyagulani (alias Bobi Wine), Forum for Democratic Change, and independent candidates were more likely to use social media for campaigning and sharing content. This likely also follows the distribution for the number of candidates represented by these parties.



Twitter

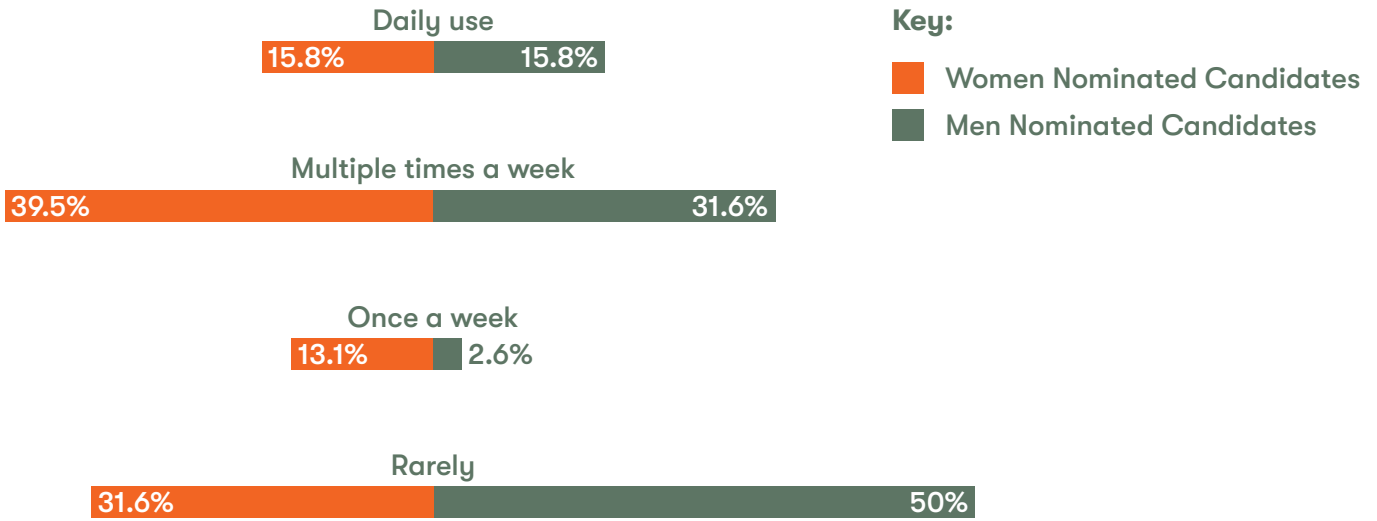
Fewer accounts of women politicians were identified on Twitter, indicating low use of the platform for campaigning and engagement purposes. A majority of accounts that were identified had low post volume, low number of followers, and low engagement.

How does the use of social media platforms differ amongst men and women candidates?

Facebook

The use of Facebook by women candidates in Uganda was higher than that of their male counterparts. Women candidates accounted for 68 percent of account posting at least once per week during the campaign period, compared to 50 percent of accounts attributed to men. Both men and women candidates averaged 12 posts per account in December. This figure dropped to 9 posts per month in January.

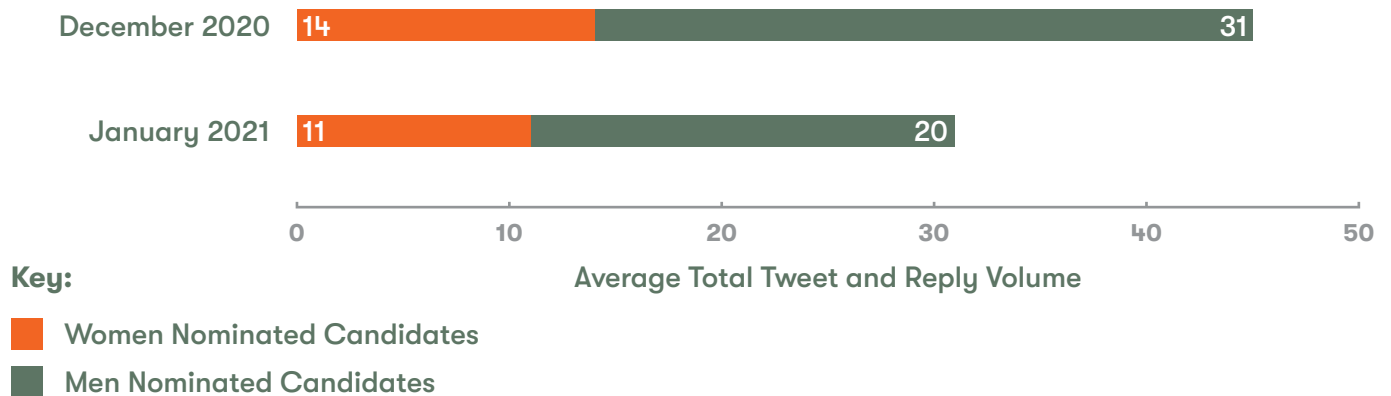
Facebook usage by women and men nominated candidates during December and January



Twitter

Overall, the accounts of men politicians accumulated a larger following than that of women. On average, accounts attributed to men politicians had 23,942 followers (after accounting for outliers) on average while those attributed to women politicians had an average of 15,915 followers. During the months of December and January, the total tweet and reply count of men candidates was twice that of women candidates. Men averaged 31 total tweets or replies in December, compared to 14 for accounts attributed to women. These figures dropped to 20 for men and 11 for women during the month of January. This low usage among the women candidates could be attributed to illiteracy, language barrier, or the digital divide in infrastructure since our study included accounts belonging to low profile individuals such as women councilors from rural areas. In order to use Twitter effectively, candidates needed to tailor their accounts to their campaign areas by either switching the language to that used in the local areas or creating separate accounts for campaigns.

Average Total Tweet and Reply volume by women and men nominated candidates during December and January



Engagement with Voters

In terms of engagement, candidates were more likely to respond to comments on Facebook compared to Twitter. On Facebook, men candidates (70 percent) were more likely to respond to comments compared to women (64 percent). On Twitter, 55 percent of women candidates responded to comments compared to 44 percent of men candidates. This could be attributed to the fact that Facebook affords long posts and responses which are valuable for politicians when engaging online.

Use of Hashtags and Creative Campaigns

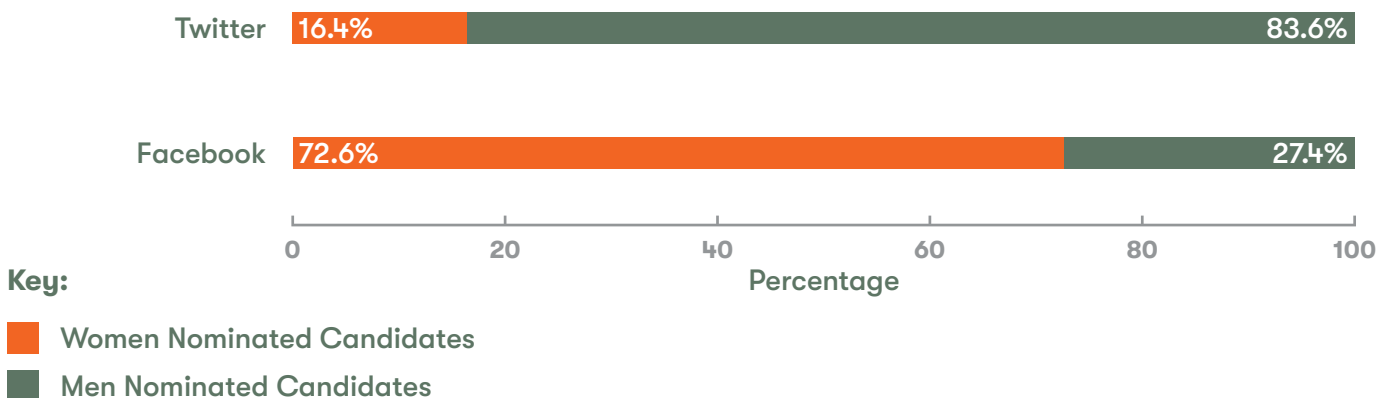
Trending hashtags were attributed mainly to men candidates running for the presidency. These hashtags included #SecuringYourFuture, #BuildingANewUganda, #OmuloodiWaali, #CountryBeforeSelf, #WeAreRemovingADictator, #ChangeYouCanTrust, #maomentum, etc. Amongst women candidates, only the use of #Mission56, #Jane4Lira, and #NancyKalembeForPresident was observed. Women candidates rarely made use of hashtags, digital media, or any other creative uses of social media platforms.

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

Distribution of Comments and Replies

During the research period, 70,006 comments and 298,571 replies were collected from the social media accounts of nominated candidates and high-profile individuals from Facebook and Twitter, respectively. As previously mentioned, men candidates had higher engagement rates on Twitter and received 83.6 percent of the total number of comments and replies on Twitter. Similarly, women were more active on Facebook, accounting for 72.6 percent of all comments received on Facebook.

Comment and Reply distribution by Gender across Two Social Media Platforms

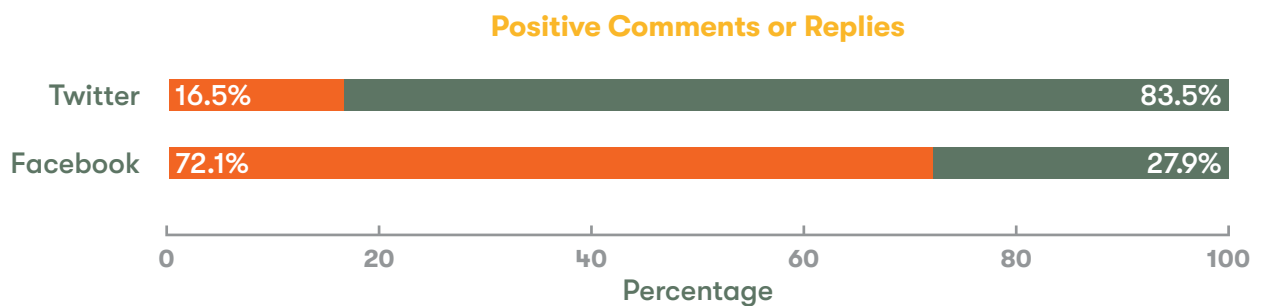
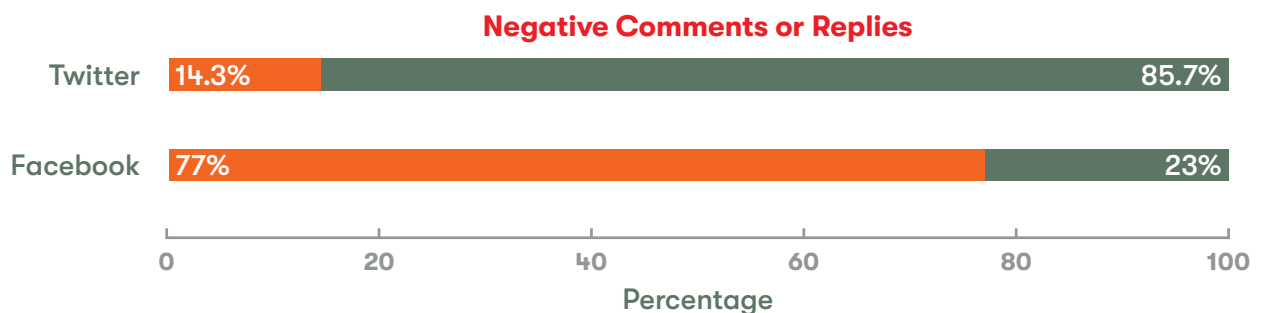


Sentiment Analysis of Comments and Replies

Using sentiment analysis, the sentiment of the comments and replies from social media users to the candidates was analysed. It is important to note here that the types of violence that women experience in online spaces are not comparable to that of men on a one-to-one basis due to underlying gender norms and power differentials as a result of culture, patriarchy, and misogyny that are rampant in society. Some researchers and practitioners in the VAW-P space recommend a different methodology for gathering data on and assessing gendered violence experienced by men. A 2007 UN Expert Group Report on Indicators to Measure Violence Against Women highlighted the potential pitfall of trying to gather and analyze data on gender-based violence experienced by men and women using the same tools, thus: “While violence against men is also an important issue requiring attention, this violence takes different forms and is not rooted in power imbalances and structural relationships of inequality between women and men. Thus, the broader issue of interpersonal violence, which has male and female victims, who may also be vulnerable by way of age, disability or social exclusion, requires a separate approach and different methodology to measure it.” Because it too, is a broader issue, “political violence” could replace “interpersonal violence” in the quotation above and the same point would be made (United Nations, 2007). For the purposes of this analysis, the research team wanted to quantify the volume of positive and negative commentary to amplify this difference in online experiences between men and women, but the findings should be understood within this understanding of the differential impacts of gendered violence against men and women.

According to the data, higher engagement by a candidate group leads to a higher volume of negative comments across both platforms. On Facebook, women candidates received 77 percent of negative comments while on Twitter, men candidates received 85.7 percent of negative replies.

Distribution of Negative and Positive Comments or Replies by Gender



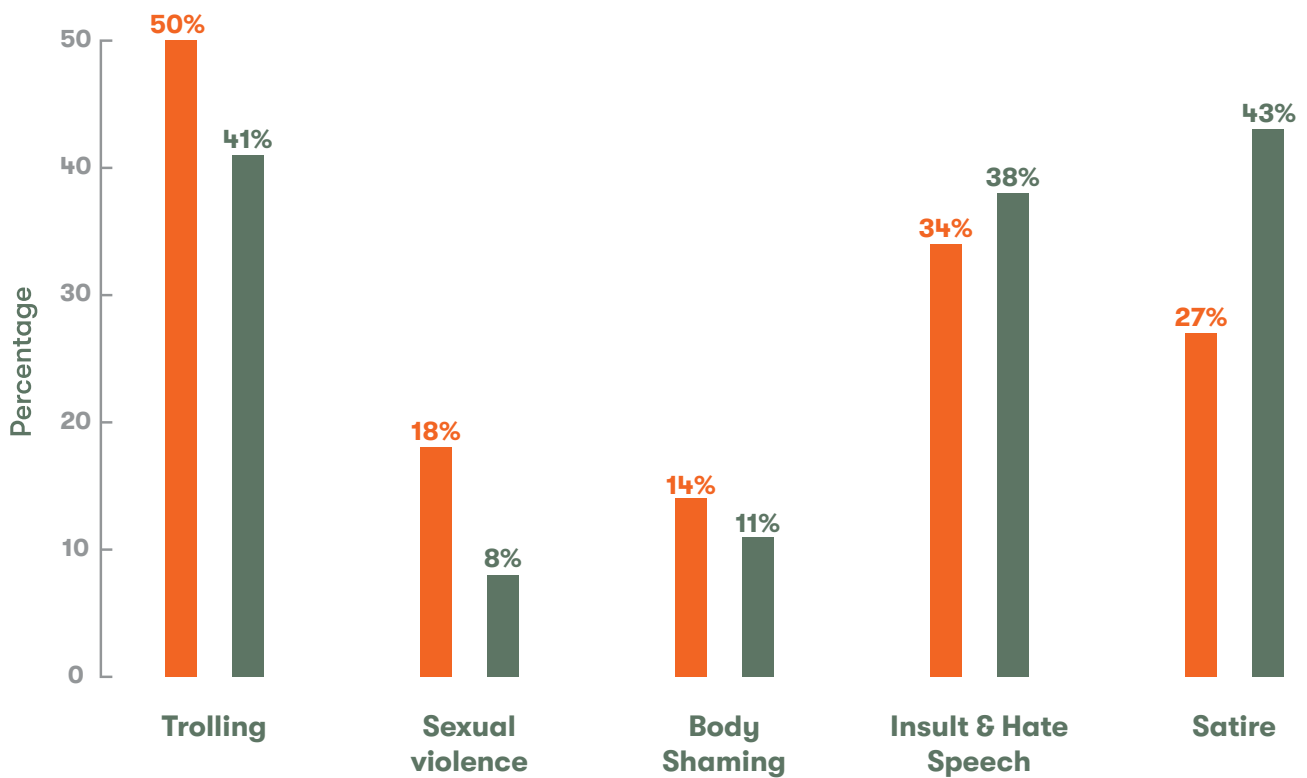
Key:

- Women Nominated Candidates
- Men Nominated Candidates

Types of Online Violence Experienced

Women candidates were more likely to experience trolling, sexual violence and body shaming compared to their male counterparts. Men candidates were more likely to experience hate speech and satirical speech as compared to women candidates.

Distribution of Accounts Experiencing a Specific Form of Online Violence based on Sentiment Analysis



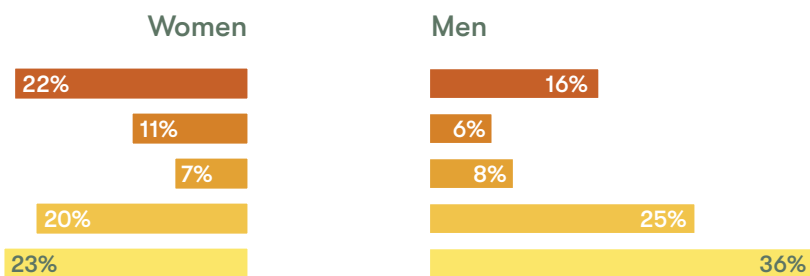
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■ Women Nominated Candidates ■ Men Nominated Candidates

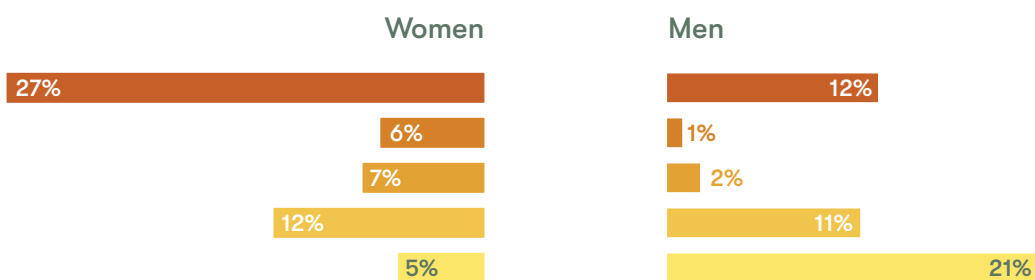
This trend was similarly observed across both social media platforms monitored. This confirmed the above assertion that when women candidates are attacked, the attacks were mostly gendered, sexualised, or about attributes that they can't change while men candidates were attacked for their inability to lead.

Distribution of Accounts Experiencing a Specific Form of Online Violence based on Sentiment Analysis across Two Social Media Platforms

Twitter



Facebook



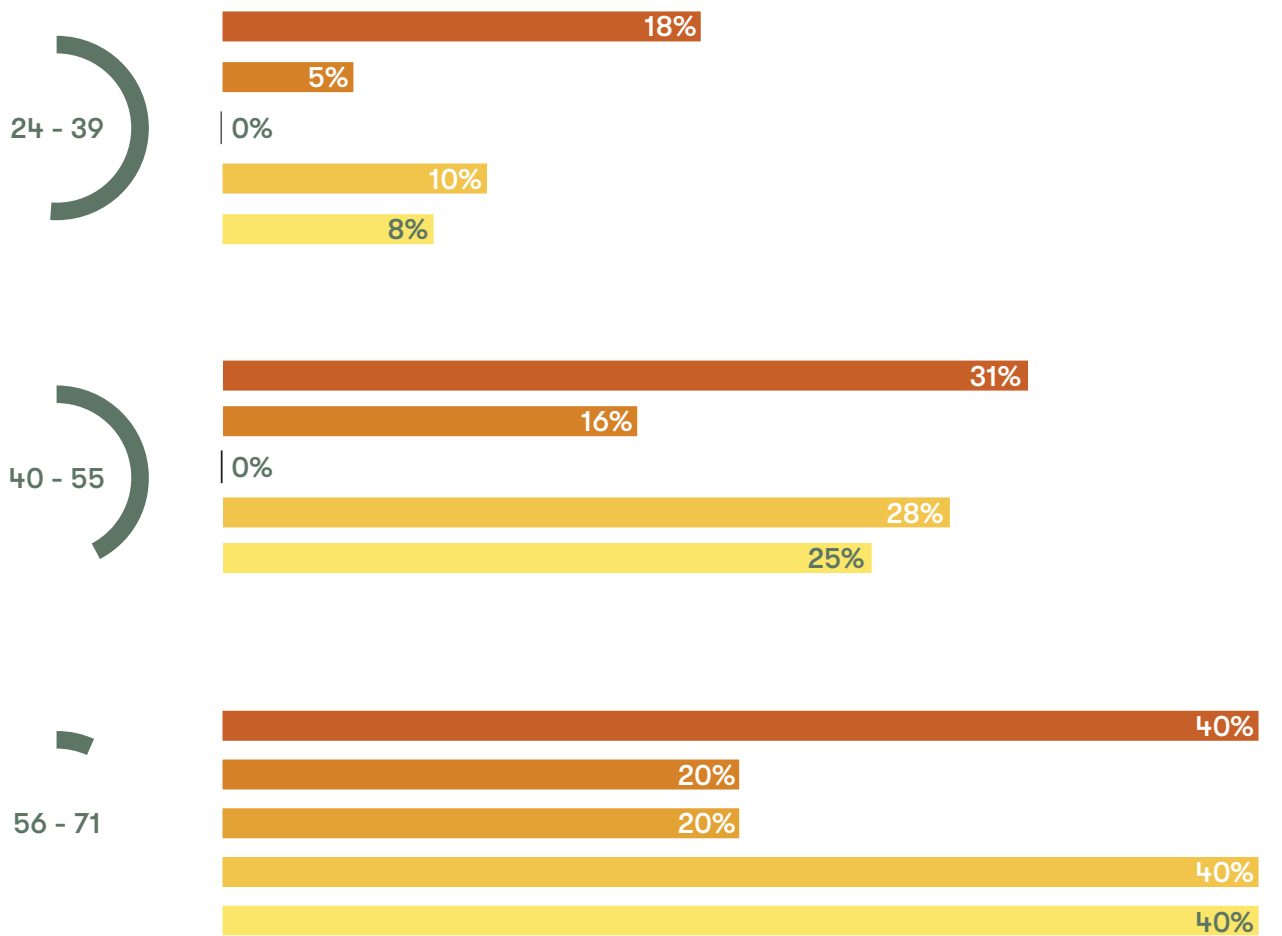
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Association between Age and on Online Violence against Women Politicians

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 seemed to increase with an increase in age. This could be because young people in Uganda make up for close to half of the registered voters i.e. 6.4 million voters are under 30 as well as the drastic increase in youth political participation during the 2021 general elections. Offline, young candidates topped their older counterparts winning 80 percent of the elective positions in 24 districts of central Uganda, and these candidates mostly used social media to mobilise support (Ewoku, 2021). In addition to this older women were also more well known and more vocal on issues as such attracted more abuse on social media.

Percentage of nominated women candidates experiencing online violence grouped by age



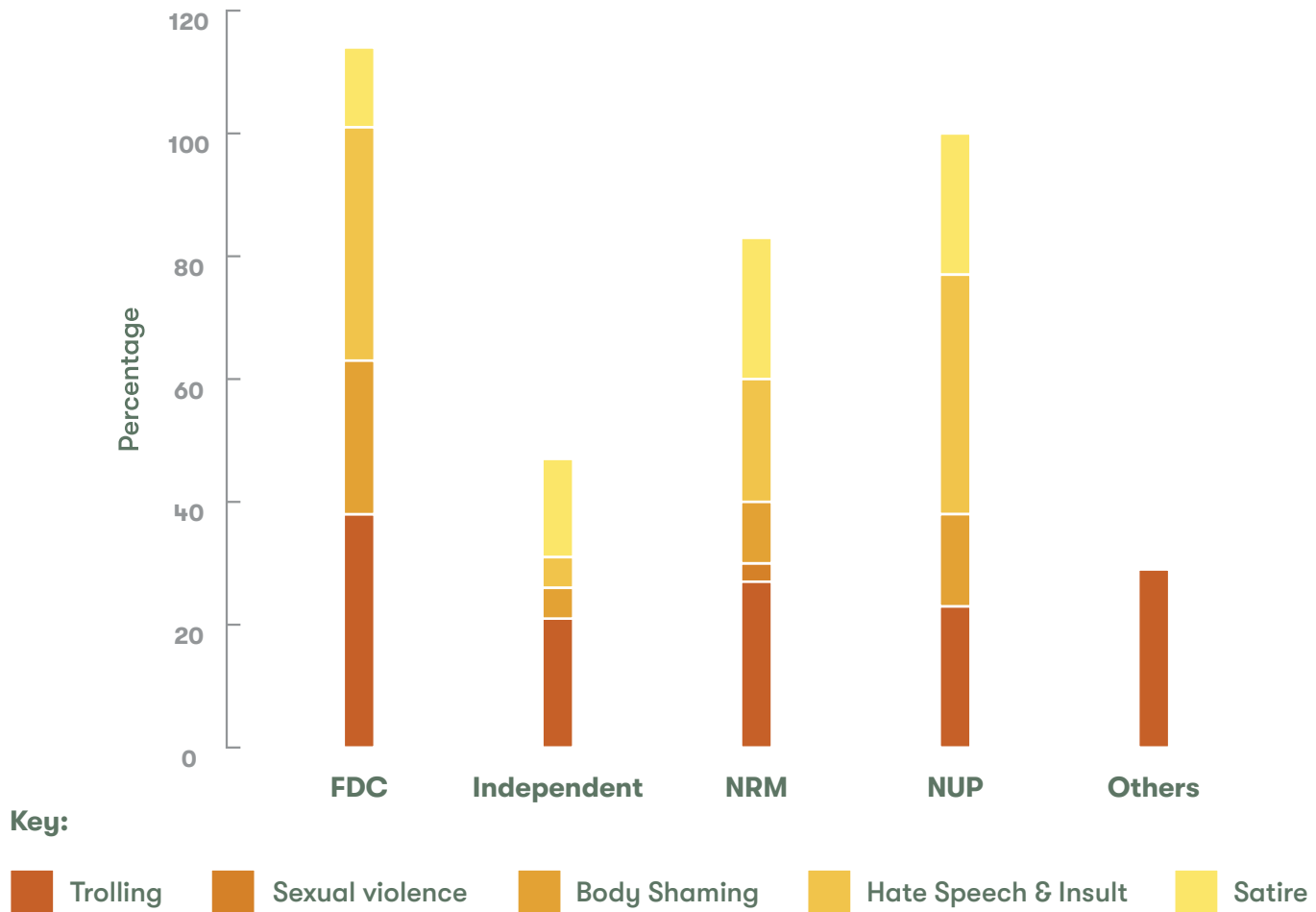
Key:

- Trolling
- Sexual violence
- Body Shaming
- Hate Speech & Insult
- Satire

Association between Political Party Affiliation and Online Violence against Women Politicians

Candidates from NRM, NUP, and FDC were most likely to experience insults, hate speech, trolling, and sexual violence. Candidates from the remaining parties had low social media presence and engagement. Independent candidates also received a lower amount of online violence compared to their counterparts in the three political parties mentioned above. This could be because the majority of independent woman candidates were low-profile candidates who were less vocal in politics and attracted less attention.

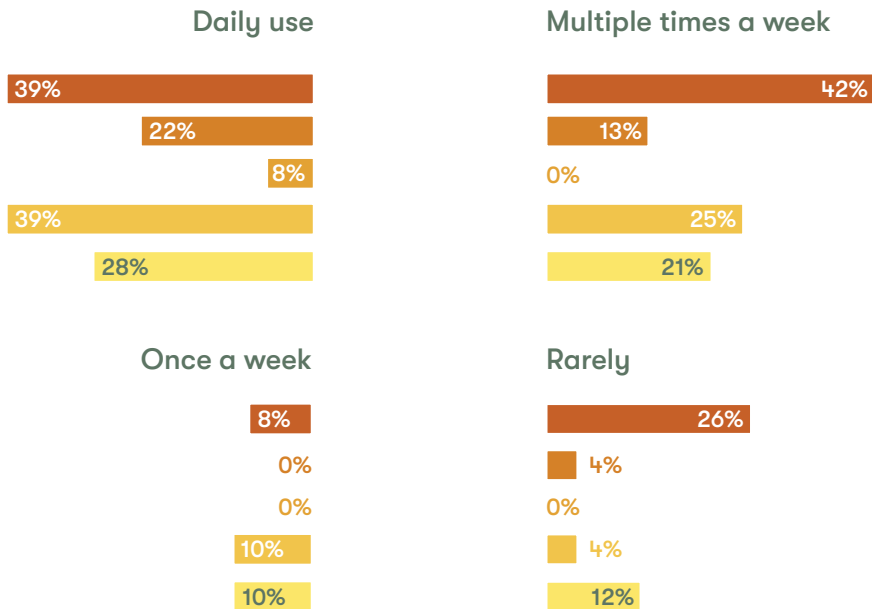
Percentage of nominated women candidates experiencing online violence grouped by their party affiliations



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

As evidenced previously, higher usage of social media platforms resulted in higher levels of online violence.

Percentage of nominated women candidates experiencing online violence grouped by social media usage frequency



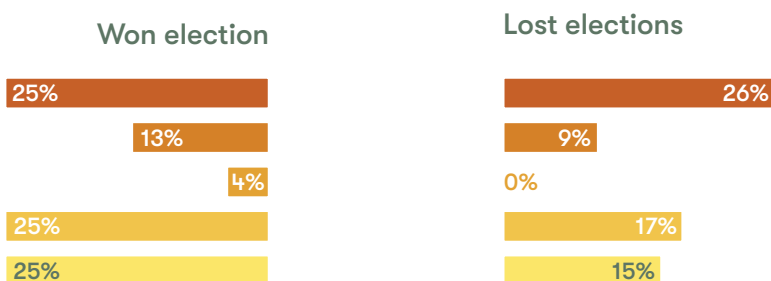
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Relationship between Online Violence against Women Politicians and Election Outcome

There were no significant differences in online violence experienced between women who went on to win or lose their contested seats.

Percentage of nominated women candidates experiencing online violence grouped by the election outcome



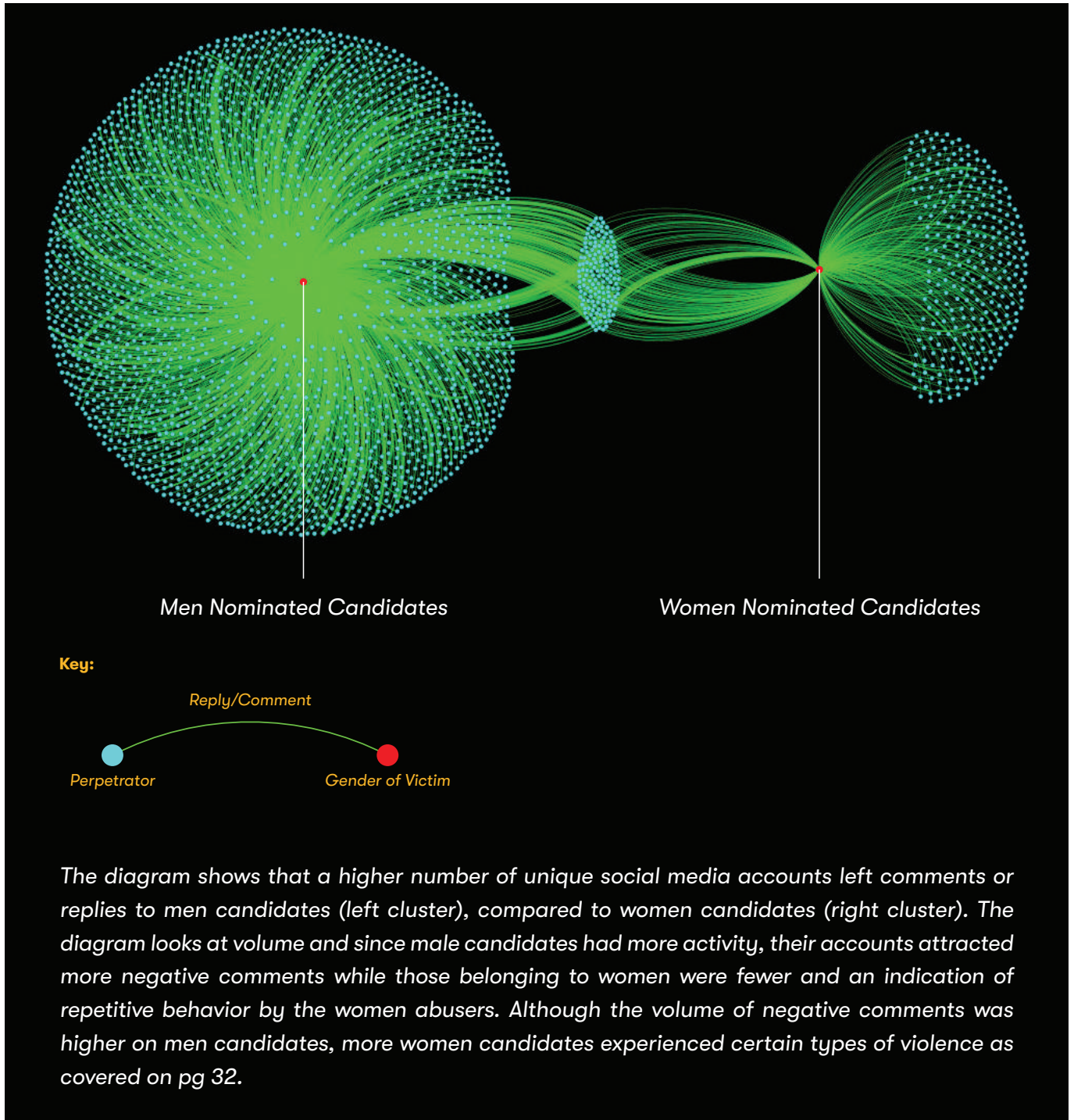
Key:



Relationship between Perpetrators and Gender of Political Candidate

Using network analysis, the accounts posting comments or replies to each gender were mapped out. The diagram shows that a higher number of unique accounts left comments or replies to men candidates (left cluster), compared to women candidates (right cluster). Fewer numbers of unique accounts posted comments or replies to men and women candidates (middle cluster). This could indicate that certain accounts target women specifically.

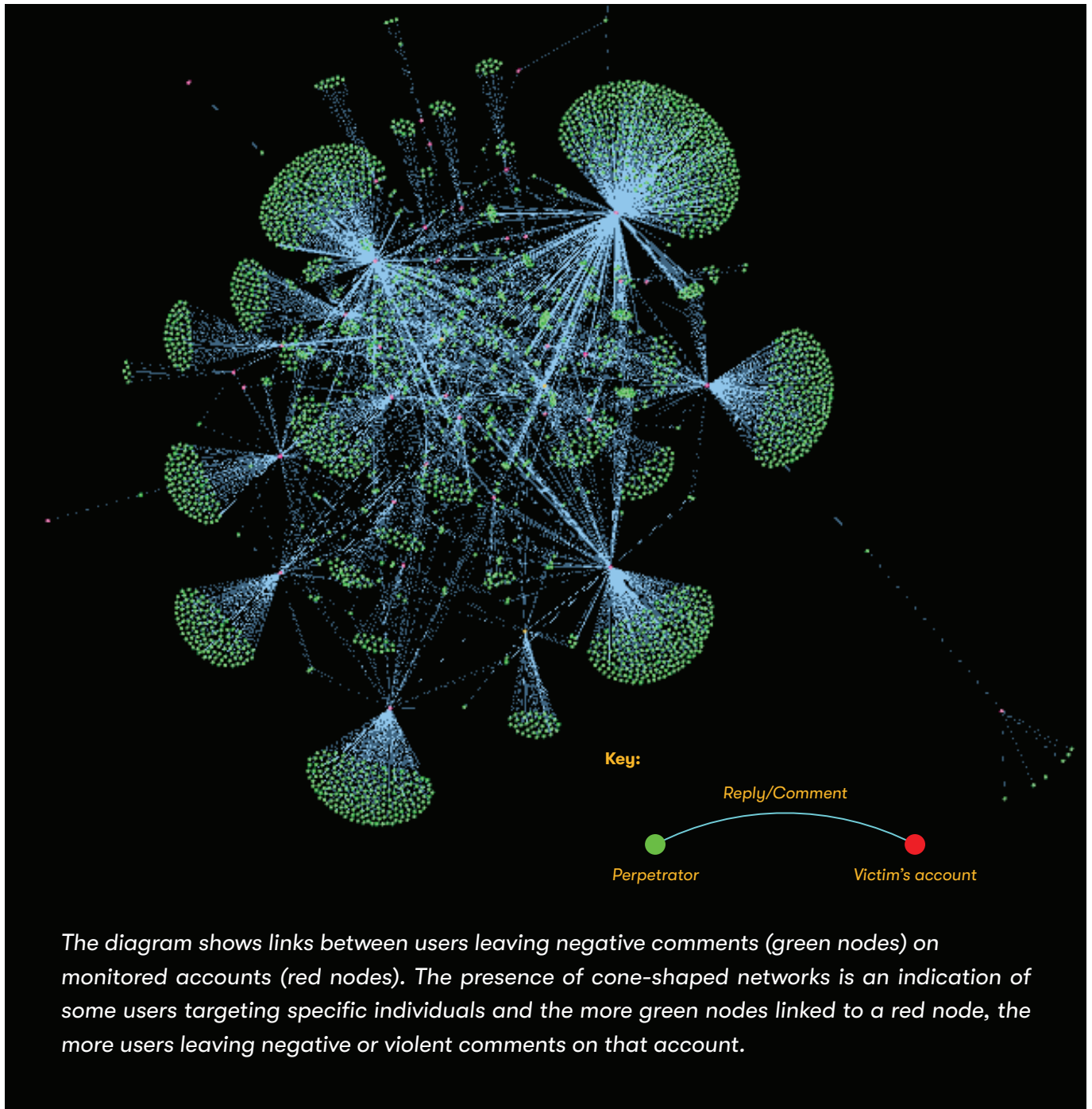
Gendered network diagram showing perpetrators against the gender of their victims



Reply behavior between Perpetrators and Political Candidates

To evaluate individualized attacks, we mapped out perpetrators and their respective victims which revealed multiple clusters of individuals linked to specific individuals. These links are evidenced by the cone-shaped sections in the network diagram below with the smaller end of the cone representing the victim and the circular top of the cone representing the perpetrators attacking that victim. The larger the cone top the more perpetrators on the victim. Additionally, the density of certain cones within the network diagram also demonstrated the presence of repetitive and dedicated behavior among some perpetrators.

Reply Network diagram showing the distribution and links between the perpetrators and their victims



Discussion



Discussion

Violence has historically been used as a tool to intimidate and exclude women from political participation and decision-making, whether on the campaign trail or in an elected office. However, the 2021 scientific elections in Uganda were a unique and novel opportunity for politicians to challenge the status quo by making use of different media for the purposes of campaigning.

The COVID-19 pandemic created conditions and operating procedures that disallowed the congregation of large groups of persons for rallying and campaigning. Women politicians tend to be less funded than their male counterparts, and events such as rallies and the use of mass media such as radio and TV are still very expensive for many aspiring politicians - particularly women. Uganda Communication Commission states that about 50% of Ugandans have access to the internet, this means that 1 out of every 2 Ugandans could access a social media platform (UCC, 2021). As such, social media presents an affordable and far-reaching tool to reach voters, especially with younger constituents.

However, the use of social media platforms for campaigning, sharing election-related information, and engaging with voters and future constituents by women politicians is still very low in Uganda, across age groups, party affiliations, and regions. Identifying social media accounts of women politicians proved to be a difficult task and the research team found it difficult to attain a sample size large enough to have a representative sample. Accounts that were monitored were irregular with posting content and often failed to engage with audiences in any meaningful way. There is a need for continued research on this

area, particularly in other African countries with larger digital footprints such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa.

This low uptake of social media may be due to a significant digital gender divide. According to the GSMA, in 2019, the digital gender gap in mobile internet use for sub-Saharan Africa was 41 percent (GSMA, 2019). Women tend to have lower skill levels in terms of digital literacy, use of digital tools, and STEM careers across the continent. Furthermore, more broadly, relatively few African technocrats and politicians are aware of or working on data and digital governance, especially, in terms of how technology can impact democracies and political participation. These challenges limit women from making full use of the positive aspects of digital space and also make them more susceptible to the negative effects of these technologies.

Unsurprisingly, higher social media activity was linked to higher levels of online violence against women politicians. Politicians that were monitored were more likely to receive negative comments on Twitter compared to Facebook. However, women politicians were more likely to receive online violence that was sexualized in nature, including sexualized abuse and body shaming. Men candidates were more likely to receive hate speech and satire. These findings are in line with previous research that shows the role that patriarchy and misogyny play in our society that results in women being most frequently attacked for their personal attributes such as gender, body, relationships, etc. Men are more likely to be attacked for their ideologies and professional performance.

Overall, it is important for women politicians to make use of readily accessible tools to engage with their voters and constituents. It is important to note that women politicians may also stay away from these online platforms due to the fear of experiencing online violence and the lack of support on how to deal with any incidents of online violence. As discussed in the background section, women who come forward to discuss their experiences of online violence are often discredited as leaders and often subjected to more violence. This, in turn, hampers reporting, research, and action towards curbing violence in online spaces.

Organizations such as the Uganda Parliamentary Women's Association (UWOPA) and women's groups invested in women's leadership must focus more efforts on building digital literacy, providing training on digital security, and where needed, providing trauma-centered support and response to online violence. However, the onus of tackling online violence must not be placed upon the shoulders of women who have had these negative experiences. Below, we present actionable recommendations for civil society, government, and the private sector.

Recommendations

We identified a number of recommendations from women actors, civil society actors for political organizations, the electoral management body, national processes such as UWOPA, women's groups, media, and civil society to implement.

Civil Society

1

Digital safety training: Provide courses and refresher training on digital safety and hygiene for all aspiring and incumbent women politicians to navigate online platforms, set strong passwords, use password managers, use encrypted messaging, etc.

2

Digital literacy training: Provide training on relevant digital tools to aspiring and incumbent women politicians. This could include the proficient use of social media platforms, including optimizing profiles or accounts for maximum engagement while also setting up safeguards such as who can direct message, how to block or mute abusers, how to block or mute anonymous or new accounts, etc.

3

Dedicated Digital Safety Experts: Online violence must be addressed swiftly and transparently to uphold democratic processes and curb the virality of offensive online posts. Civil society, together with the government, should work to set up a dedicated desk or team using human rights-based and gender-sensitive approaches such as civil society engagement to support aspiring and incumbent women politicians on an ongoing basis for issues such as hacking, doxxing, non-consensual sharing of images, documenting online violence, etc. This should also include the training of law enforcement personnel and prosecutors on the prominent issues related to OVAW-P and how to handle these cases in an appropriate, timely, and fair manner.

4

Awareness Raising about OVAW-P: De-stigmatize talking about violence, online and in the physical world and promote the use of reporting mechanisms of perpetrators of online violence. Work together with men within political leadership and in civil society to strengthen the understanding and impact of OVAW-P on political processes. Involve men as transformative agents of change in the safe and fair participation of women in politics.

5

Increase Collaborative Research on Online Behaviours and Violence: There is a dearth of research on internet studies within the African continent, particularly of feminist internet methodologies. Civil society and academic institutions need to increase the volume of interdisciplinary and intersectional research on how violence manifests in online spaces, online behaviours of constituents, the spread of mis/disinformation and hate speech, the role of influencers in shaping discourse, etc. as well as developing appropriate policy responses to a rapidly changing digital ecosystem in a progressive and fair manner.

Government

6

Online engagement and freedom of expression (FoE): As a signatory to both the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), domestication and application of the provisions on FoE will provide a level playing field for all groups to organise and arbitrarily participate effectively on online platforms during the electioneering period.

7

Promote Multi-stakeholder engagement and consultations towards the ratification of legal provisions such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG) which enable the exercise of the democratic principles towards #TheAfricaWeWant and the 2020-2030 Africa Union Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa.

Technology Companies and Other Private Sector Players

8

Improve reporting mechanisms: Social media platforms must improve reporting and redress mechanisms such as a ticketing system for reports, feedback on reports, etc. However, it is important to use a victim-centred approach based on care and protection which is mindful of reducing the burden of reporting and re-traumatization of victims.

9

Need for improved use of local languages in content moderation: With the growth of artificial intelligence as a tool for content moderation, the nuances and contexts of local ecosystems and languages need to be taken into account. Social media companies need to spend more resources and personnel on improved content moderation, especially during periods of elections or unrest.

10

Localized input for hate speech lexicons: As mentioned above, there is a need to engage with local stakeholders to build and continue to update hate speech lexicons to support automated and manual content moderation strategies.

Conclusion

As a long-term goal, Ugandan women, inside and outside parliament, must engage a two-pronged political struggle against underdevelopment and patriarchy. The agenda for achieving this is multilayered and complex and involves an altering of gender relations. It will take a total transformation in prevailing ideologies as well as social and political structures to confer substance and power to women's participation in politics: a redefinition of power and equality - Dr. Sylvia Tamale, When Hens Begin to Crow

Women leaders face challenges in political participation due to lower literacy levels, intimidation within families/communities, limited financial resources for campaigning, and an absence of a focus on gender equality in leadership. Women suffer from patriarchal, cultural, and traditional perspectives that question their political leadership.

A Gendered Response is Needed Now More Than Ever: An Opportunity for Women Politicians

The internet, and digital tools, have been revolutionary in enabling people from all walks of life, and particularly marginalized groups across the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, and ability, to access and produce content. Digital spaces have opened the doors for women to participate in political discourse, where women were historically excluded, underfunded, and invisibilized. The internet and social media are a powerful, low-or-no-cost way for women political actors to reach a large number of people. Social media provides greater opportunities for female politicians to promote themselves and improve their status in the political power play without the usual prohibitive costs for in-person gatherings and campaigning. The ability to engage with voters, for example, by sharing voice notes or

short video clips with large numbers of constituents can help women candidates to break their own news and have conversations with constituents in real-time. From the guidelines issued by UCC ahead of the elections and the existing legislation on engaging online, it is evident that technology and legislation inevitably reflects the societal norms and the legislators standards. A gendered response towards inclusion in Uganda politics will be useful to bridge the digital divide and accommodate the real life challenges that different groups such as women face in their quest to participate in electoral-politics.

Ahead of the World Digital Preservation Day in November 2021, there is an opportunity for stakeholders, key actors and civil tech organisations to provide capacity strengthening and assess the efforts made by women politicians to remain relevant while employing digital tools in Uganda.

The Need to Curb Online Violence

However, online violence against women politicians and gendered disinformation campaigns can and have set women's political participation back. An increase in online violence against women populations may serve as discouragement for other women wishing to participate in electoral processes. When attacks against politically-active women are channeled online, the impact is amplified. Online violence may be under-reported due its deep-rooted connection to patriarchal ideals that undermine women's participation in public spheres and particularly in decision-making. Ultimately, online violence creates a hostile environment that pushes women to censor themselves online by avoiding certain topics, softening their opinions, limiting their participation, and even opting out of platforms - or politics - altogether.

Women Make Better Leaders

Recent social studies of men and women in political power have described women as more collaborative than men (Paustian-Underdahl, 2014). Women are more likely to cooperate and work alongside

members of the opposite political party in order to reach a decision (Paxton and Hughes, 2007). Female politicians are also more likely to adopt different approaches to problem-solving and explore new and creative solutions. While the evidence on the benefits of women in leadership positions within the private sector continues to grow, in the public realm, women are more likely to introduce and support legislation concerning women's issues than men. These positive influences can play a significant role in the growth and development of Uganda in the years to come.

The demand for equal representation in politics and decision-making is crucial to building strong and sustainable democracies. Women must be equipped with the right skills to make full of digital tools for their political aspirations, but there is also a need for online platforms to protect women in public spheres from the threat of online violence. There is much work to be done on both fronts, and this research is one of the first steps in documenting social media behaviours and recommending potential solutions for political bodies, women's groups, civil society, government and the tech sector.

Appendix

1. Definition of forms of Violence Against Women in Politics

Violence Against Women (VAW)	Violence against women has been defined and elaborated in many human rights and feminist instruments and discourse including CEDAW. The following forms of violence share similarities to online violence against women: intimate partner violence, domestic violence, sexual harassment, harassment based on gender, stalking, and inciting others to commit violence against women.
Physical violence	This form of violence involves efforts to inflict bodily harm and injury (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 743). It entails touching, jostling, or other forms of unwelcome physical proximity and even involuntary confinement.
Sexual violence and harassment	This type of violence comprises sexual acts and attempts at sexual acts by coercion (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 743). Sexual harassment entails unwelcome sexual comments or advances.
Economic violence	This is a type of abuse seeking to deny or control women's access to financial resources, ranging from property damage, petty vandalism to attempts to undermine a woman's economic livelihood (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 743).
Psychological violence	This type of violence inflicts trauma on individuals' mental state or emotional well-being (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019, p. 743). Examples include death and rape threats, carried out in person or online.
Semiotic/Symbolic Violence	This type of violence uses language and images to denigrate women in an attempt to deny their political rights (Krook, 2020). It aims to harm public perceptions about women by rendering them invisible and incompetent (Krook, 2020).
Hate speech	Discriminatory comments targeting a group of people such as a tribe, religion, sexual orientation, etc.
Trolling	The use of inflammatory messages to provoke emotional responses out of people, disrupting otherwise civil discussion.
Insult	The use of offensive or rude words
Body shaming	The action or practice of expressing humiliation about another individual's body shape or size and how they look.

Satire	humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people in the context of contemporary politics.
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2. Definitions of tools of misinformation and disinformation

Cyborg	A hybrid account that combines a bot's tirelessness with human subtlety. In this case, a human periodically takes over a bot account to respond to other users and to post original content (Klepper, 2020).
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Bot	An autonomous program on the internet or another network that can interact with systems or users. In the social media context, these autonomous programs can run accounts to spread content without human involvement (Klepper, 2020).
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Cyber troops	Government, military, or political party teams are committed to manipulating public opinion over social media (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017).
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Troll farm	An institutionalised group of internet trolls that seeks to interfere in political opinions and decision-making.
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3. Definitions of the characteristics of online disinformation

Malign Intent	The use of coded language; iterative, context-based visual and textual memes; and other tactics to avoid detection on social media platforms –is the greatest obstacle to detecting and enforcing against online gendered abuse and disinformation (Wilson Center, 2021).
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Falsity	Disinformation is anchored in the spread of false narratives.
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Coordination	Concerted efforts to target people with false or misleading information, often with some strategic objective (political, social, financial), while using the affordances provided by social media platforms (Serrato, 2020). Sometimes referred to as Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour.
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4. Other Definitions

Machine Learning	The use and development of computer systems that are able to learn and adapt without following explicit instructions, by using algorithms and statistical models to analyse and draw inferences from patterns in data.
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Deep Learning	A type of machine learning that imitates the way humans gain certain types of knowledge.
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5. Workshop Generated lexicon

Sexual Violence	Sexual Violence	Body shaming
<p>Leg vendor Desert Kitone Intersex Small dick Cunt Political Prostitute Slut Dumped Used Size Yange bbere ddene Eggali ekozeko Pulling Did you pull Pulling the bean oyina bush oyimwe Sleeping around Malaya Promiscuous Mpaako You can't twerk Mafisi Nitakutomba Nitakuingia Fuck boy/Girl You'll confuse MPs with your beauty Ako Nkalya Chew you Harvest you Eat you Towooma Ka bebe kawooma Mpaako nkuwe akalulu Tumbiiza my sound then I vote for you She is dry Short dick Nabukaku Small balls</p>	<p>Mulya buto Tujja kuzina mu buli kituli laba ebakuli Towoma Sausage dick Tooth pick Lesbian Gay Homo Fag Faggot Oli musiyazi Tazala Barren You belong in the kitchen Tomalako Your not man enough Alphabet people Lgbt trans Confused gender Mbolo Manege Nebwozina Nnyoko Dicko Detoother Gold digger I'll take you back to your parents</p>	<p>Ugly Flat breasts Flat chest fake hips Chappati boobs mama lusus Fat bitch Are you pregnant Party prostitute Skinny - simulya Sharp bums Flat bums Full stop Using filters the window laba dibu Ebinyo Sooka osenye amanyo Fat mama Tonyirira Walking bones FACO Wakwata mukizigo Overweight You are hard okaluba Ka portable Beardless Toothpick Obese Body of a kaloli Short Sagging boobs Kaloli legs Big eyes ebiiso Big lips You can see the future Gorilla What we ordered vs what was delivered</p>
	<p>Satire</p> <p>muvumi Oli mufere Mwebamu Mukolera M7 Muyaye Spy mbegga Mulwade Ayina silimu murderer</p>	

Trolling	Insult	Hate Speech	
<p>Full of failures Attention seeker Toyina kyoli Crowd chaser Political failure Kajjanja Walking dead Time waster Cursed legislator You are weak Failure Wagwamu You faded Kwelabisa Fala Tosobola Broke Wannabe Gold digger Muyaye Tolina kyetugamba Broke guy Nobody Wasting time You are not good enough Mwadankana Your children are poorly behaved What we ordered vs what was delivered Ono analog si digital Kuba Yaka kuwa range Totukooya Nio nio Time wasters Coward Manya wookoma No votes</p>	<p>Gasiya Rubbish Nyoko Bitch Ugly Kuma Mbolo Manege Mazi Mana Wuyo Maskini Nonsense Useless Gorilla Mbwa mwe Yasamila muli kisolani Mbwa ya Kukyalo Tako Kabina Slut Musilu Stupid Dikuula Mumu Kasasiro Idiot Use your head Loud mouth Oli mbuzi Mbizi eno Liars Clown Witch Mulogo Dumb bitch Brain damage</p>	<p>Gay Kana Kato Too old Akadiye Retire Namukadde Alphabet people Lgbt trans Go and kill yourself Die Crazy Wafuka bikade You are gay A good muganda is a dead one Mukooko You are a Munyankore Kana si kanyarwanda rwandese Homo Oli musoga Oli musiyazi</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Njakuta i will kill you Drone yiyo We will come for you Know your level Just wait Your time is coming Come and face me We will rape you Know who to kulipira Burn them We know your family We know your home</p> <p>Name-calling</p> <p>Snake Wolf Moles</p>

6. Participants during the lexicon building workshop



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