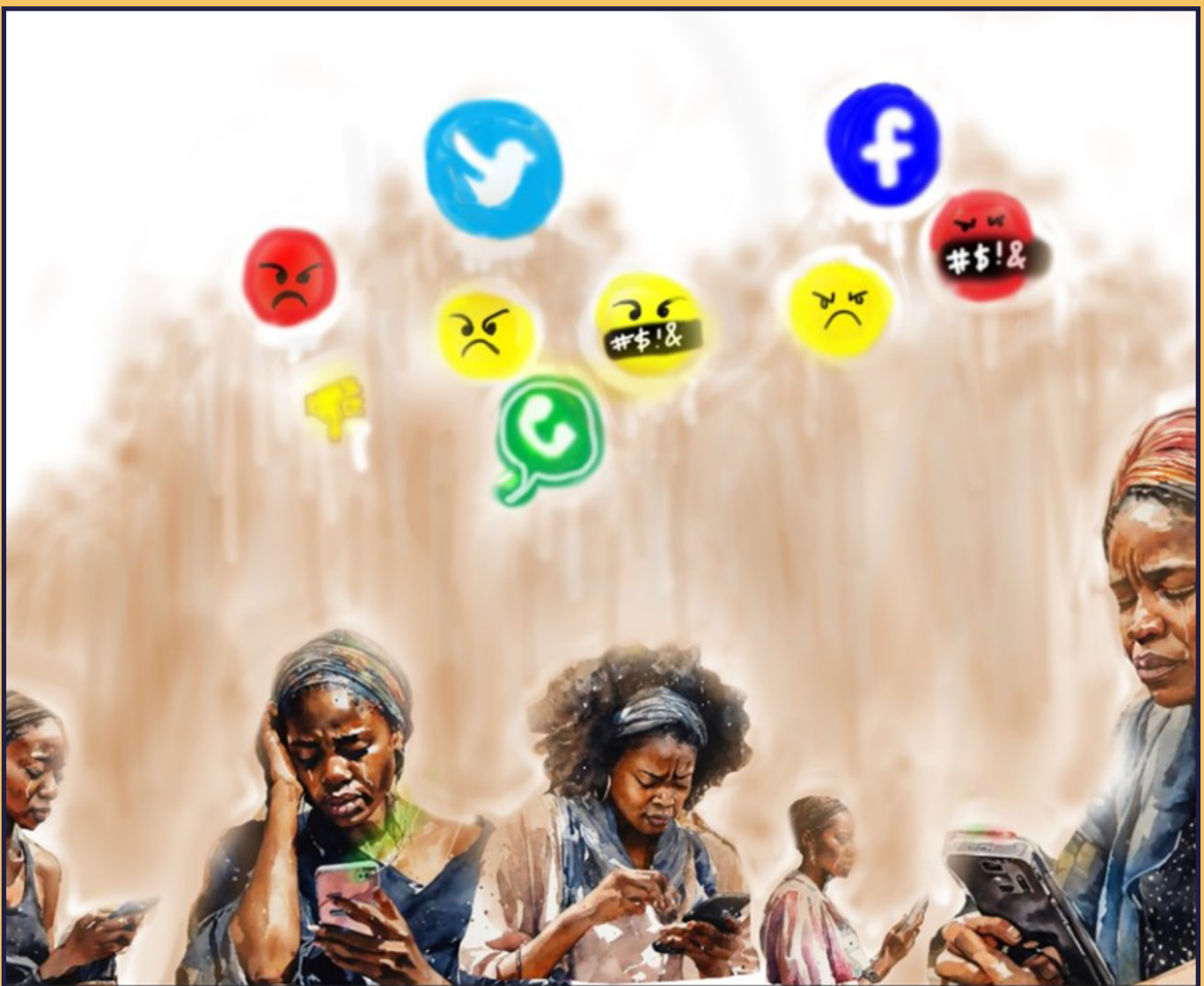**BRIEFING NOTE**

WOMEN IN POLITICS IN ZIMBABWE: HOW GENDER NORMS ARE FUELING ONLINE VIOLENCE

By the Nehanda Centre for Gender and Cultural Studies

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About the Nehanda Centre

The Nehanda Centre was established in January 2015 under the Julius Nyerere School of Social Sciences at Great Zimbabwe University. As a proponent for gender justice, it strives to be a global centre of excellence in gender and cultural studies. The Centre is anchored in the core values of Ubuntu/Hunhu (upholding human dignity), inclusiveness, innovation and creativity. The Centre endeavours to transform unequal gender relations that are prevalent in society today, and to ensure that all people are empowered with knowledge and skills they can utilise in social transformation.

Acknowledgements

Key findings

- This study finds that all women leaders interviewed in Zimbabwe have faced some kind of online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P). However, the higher the profile of a woman leader, the more likely she is to face gendered attacks online.

- OVAW-P includes sexualised violence, threats of violence, account hacking and misinformation, all of which have a negative impact on women's wellbeing and, ultimately, on their participation and success in politics as some delete their accounts and shun social media and politics entirely.

- OVAW-P stems from the negative gender and cultural norms of a patriarchal society that view women's place as in the home, while their male counterparts are viewed as leaders who control women and the public space.

- Norms associated with the body and beauty standards are used as a form of violence. These norms are tied to colonialism, when racialised beauty standards were introduced and European features became idolised while African features, including skin colour, were disparaged. Insults based on a failure to conform to these standards are a form of structural violence.

- Few women in local governance institutions knew about Zimbabwe's 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act, meant to target online crimes. Most non-parliamentarians expressed limited knowledge of the Act, and have little faith that it can assist them to tackle this growing phenomenon, given the patriarchal nature of society and the complexities around apprehending abusers. They were, however, willing to report online violence.

- This study confirms the need to raise awareness on OVAW-P, strengthen the knowledge and capacities of law enforcement agencies, and reinforce the digital literacy skills of women politicians and activists to counter such violence.

Key terms

Intersectionality: term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) as an analytical lens that demands closer inspection of the ways multiple identities or multiple forms of marginalised identity interlock to produce particularised experiences.

Misogyny: a 'system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance' (Manne, 2018:33).

Netnography: a qualitative research method that seeks to understand online behaviours and activities through systematic observation and the analysis of online data (Kozinets et al., 2014).

Online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P): acts of violence against women that occur in part through the use of technology because they are women or that affect women disproportionately (UN Human Rights Council, 2018).

Politicking: the practice of engaging in active and passive political activities, from contesting as a candidate to supporting leaders and their political cause.

Social media: Internet-based communication technologies, including for example Twitter (now X), Facebook and WhatsApp, that allow people to share ideas, expression, opinions and communications through virtual communities and networks.

Introduction

> 'It's men who engage in violence offline and it's men who bully us online.'

Women's participation in governance in Zimbabwe remains limited by the hostile nature of the country's governance environment, which is characterised by resource constraints and gender-based violence (GBV) (Alanis, 2020). In the years following Zimbabwe's independence, women's involvement in formal politics was very low, with only three women serving in the first parliament in 1980 – just 7.5% of the total (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2021). While the proportion of female political leaders has increased steadily to reach 31% in the Parliament and 45% in the Senate in 2023, courtesy of the introduction of quotas, the share of women leaders has not increased as much in local governance, where there has been no quota (IPU, 2023a; IPU 2013b). At present, women account for only 12% of members of local authorities (UN Women, 2023).

The advent of the Internet and social media has, to some extent, helped to reduce the gap in the political field for marginalised and excluded women with limited resources, by allowing them to wage physical campaigns and access mainstream media in emerging democracies (Kakande et al., 2023). These new tools are fast becoming powerful vehicles to advance news and share uncensored information as the local becomes global in an instant by the click of a button (International IDEA, 2021).

There is, however, a major downside: online violence. While both men and women are victims of such violence, studies prove that women in the global South are the most likely to suffer from online violence as a result of the engraved gender and other identity-based norms of patriarchal societies that disadvantage and oppress them. A survey in Zimbabwe by Bardall et al. from January 2013 to April 2018 found that online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P) during elections increased, with 60% of violent discourse and related content aimed at women politicians and activists (Bardall et al., 2018). In addition, women politicians and activists who utilise such platforms often encounter a hostile environment that deters them from maximising the use of these platforms for their political work (Kakande et al., 2021).

Despite evidence of OVAW-P, studies that document women politicians' experiences of online violence in many developing nations is lacking. Many studies show the challenges they face in accessing traditional media and celebrate the rise of the internet and social media as the equaliser for people's participation but do not explore the actual experiences of female politicians and activists using the new media.

Studies on political women on social media in Africa, particularly during election cycles, have become more common in recent years. These have included studies on Uganda's 2021 election (Kakande et al., 2022), Kenya's 2023 election (Kakande et al., 2023), and #ShePersisted studies on the challenges faced by women in politics in digital spaces across the global South[1] (Di Meco, 2023a) and in India (Di Meco 2023b).

This study has aims to unearth the nature and consequences of the OVAW-P experienced by women politicians and activists in Zimbabwe, and the gender norms at play that fuel such experiences, with a particular focus on local governance institutions. The study is important at this moment in time as Zimbabwe adopted the Cyber and Data Protection Act in 2021 to target online crime and to regulate social media usage.

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1   The reference to the 'so-called' global South and global North recognises the colonial power hierarchies implicit in these terms and the problematic nature of the terminology. For ease of reading, the remainder of this report refers to the regions as global South and North only.

The study identifies the limitations for female politicians and activists in their effective use of social media platforms for successful political campaigns and engagements with citizens. It also advocates for greater awareness of OVAW-P, for training to enhance the skills of female politicians, and the development of tools and new codes of conduct that further strengthen implementation of the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act. It aims to contribute to the elimination of OVAW-P and the increased and effective utilisation of social media platforms by women politicians and activists.

Online violence and patriarchy

OVAW-P is linked to social norms regarding a woman's place in public and political spheres. Zimbabwe is a highly patriarchal society where men take up public space and women are relegated to private life. Women who engage in politics are seen as violating these norms. This places them in patriarchy's harmful pathway, as patriarchy polices women who threaten the system through the use of violence (Manne, 2018). A violent reaction, including OVAW-P, is, therefore, a systemic issue rather than an individual incident.

In a patriarchal system, women may also subject each other to violence. Women who follow the patriarchal rules can use their allegiance with the political/patriarchal establishment to push back against other women who transgress against social expectations. Citing Zimbabwe's 2018 harmonised election, for example, Marima (2019) highlights the abuse of women by other women, as women mocked the performance of those who lost, saying they should have stayed out of men's business. Understanding OVAW-P as a response to a perceived threat to the patriarchy also helps to explain why women in politics can be treated differently according to the strength of their adherence to the system – a common phenomenon in Zimbabwe.

In the patriarchal system, men are also considered to be 'king makers' who control power, while women are placed at the lower levels of the political ladder. Masculinity empowers men to exert control over the lives of people around them, particularly women (Mashiri, 2013), who are seen as weak individuals with no capacity to win power or lead people without assistance from men.

Women's agency and success in politics are often rumoured to hinge on giving sexual favours to politically powerful males, such as heads of political parties and top military officers, even though there is no known personal relationship between the woman and the man. Women who hold powerful positions often find that their success is attributed to their associations with powerful men. Many women have experienced this, including Grace Mugabe, who was married to former President Robert Mugabe, Vice President Joice Mujuru's (married to General Solomon Mujuru), and Oppah Muchinguri-Kashiri who is often associated with General Tongogara (Bardall et al., 2018).

The arguments of female politicians, their opinions on policies and their future plans are often overshadowed by comments about who designed of their clothing, their hairstyle of choice, their educational level, and their emotional demeanour. Indeed, female politicians face increased online media scrutiny, which is attributed to the media's adherence to gender stereotypes that favour men over women in positions of power (McIntosh, 2013). In short, OVAW-P is engineered by sexist attitudes that want to stop women from having a voice in political spheres and deter them from expressing their opinions.

Zimbabwe's political system

Zimbabwe has a three-tier system of governance: the national government, provincial leadership and local councils. At the national level, the executive includes the President and their cabinet, which is comprised mostly of members of parliament (MPs), although the president can appoint up

to five ministers from outside Parliament. Zimbabwe also has two legislative houses, the National Assembly and Senate. Most members of the National Assembly, 210 of 270, are elected directly by constituents through a first-past-the-post system. The other 60 seats are reserved for women, six women for each of the nation's 10 provinces. The Senate has 80 members, of which 60 are chosen through party-list proportional representation. The party lists alternate between men and women (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013).

The quota system was introduced in the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe for two election cycles and was then extended for an additional 10 years through Constitutional Amendment No. 2 of 2021. The Amendment also creates a quota for local authorities, where the proportional representation system is applied so that women account for 30% of total council members (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 2) Act, 2021).

The quota system has increased the number of women serving in politics. However, it has been critiqued for reducing the number of women who are elected directly and for limiting the effectiveness of women in politics, as quota representatives do not have access to constituency development funds (Musasa et al., 2022).

Under the national government there are 10 provinces, which are led by Ministers of State for Provincial Affairs, who are appointed by the President. The provinces are further sub-divided into 59 districts and 1,200 wards. Each district is led by a District Coordinator who is appointed by the Public Services Commission. Rural and urban district councils are comprised of elected ward counsellors, who select one member to be the mayor (for urban councils) or chairperson (for rural councils) (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013).

The country has been ruled by the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) since it gained its independence in 1980. From 1980 until 2017, the country was ruled by Robert Mugabe, who was Prime Minister from 1980-1987, then President until 2017 when Emmerson Mnangagwa became President, beginning what the government calls, the 'New Dispensation' (Msimanga et al., 2021).

Though ZANU-PF has led the country since inception, opposition parties have repeatedly tried to oust the party from power. The biggest rival to ZANU-PF's one-party rule has been Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which was founded in 1999 by Morgan Tsvangirai. Because the country is sharply divided between the ruling and opposition parties, elections have often resulted in violence between the parties' rival supporters. In 2008, election violence throughout the party led Mr. Tsvangirai to withdraw from the second round of votes. This resulted in the parties creating a government of national unity (GNU), with Mugabe as president and Tsvangirai as Prime Minister. They ruled together until 2013, when ZANU-PF's single-party rule began once again (Raftopoulos, 2013).

While there have been divisions in the opposition for years, these intensified in the New Dispensation after founding leader Tsvangirai died in February 2018. The majority of the party coalesced behind Nelson Chamisa, but a woman – Thokozani Khupe – also claimed leadership of the party. In 2018, Chamisa led a party identified as MDC-Alliance (MDC-A), while Khupe led MDC-Tsvangirai (MDC-T), becoming one of four women to run for president that year (ZEC, 2018).

Power wrangles continued after the election, and Douglas Mwonzora of the MDC-A left to join MDC-T and eventually became leader of that party. In May 2020, a supreme court ruling found that MDC-T was the successor to MDC and stripped MDC-A of its public funding and headquarters (Ndoro, 2020). This led to the expulsion of dozens of serving MPs and over 200 local councillors (Razao, 2023). In turn, a new Chamisa-led party was formed, known as the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). The seats of expelled politicians were filled in the 2022 by-elections.

Social media in Zimbabwe

The use of social media for personal and political needs in Zimbabwe has been increasing alongside the changes in the country's politics. Afrobarometer reported that 95% of Zimbabwean households had mobile phones in 2018, although only 43% of mobile phone owners had access to the internet on their devices (Moyo-Nyede and Ndoma, 2020). The proportions are lower in rural areas where only 28% have access to the internet and 15% have no mobile phone service at all (Moyo-Nyede and Ndoma, 2020).

This mirrors the disadvantage of rural areas, where unemployment is higher and many people rely on the informal market for their livelihoods. Unemployment is also shaped by gender and age, with women and youth both four times less likely to be formally employed (Robalino et al., 2021).

There is also a gender gap in digital spaces across Africa as a whole with only 34% of women having access to the internet while male access stands at 45% (Manyinyire, 2023). Zimbabwe itself has 1.5 million social media users, who represent 9.1% of the population (Kemp, 2023). Facebook is the social media site with the most users – 1.3 million – 44% of whom are women (Kemp, 2023). Instagram has 381,000 users and Twitter[2] (now X) has 323,200 users. The digital gender gap is greatest on Twitter, where 24% of users are women and 76% are men (Kemp, 2023).

Access to the internet and social media in Zimbabwe has led to increased engagement in political discussion as people have access to larger networks (Dendere, 2019). By their nature, social media platforms are convenient and inexpensive and have been accepted as new mediums for information that are quick to reach out to electorates (Dziva and Shoko, 2017). However, despite their advantages, social networks can be sites of violence and of experiences that are psychologically harmful (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009; Balozwi, 2018). In 2018, for example, President Mnangagwa encouraged the Youth League of ZANU-PF to engage more people using social media, saying '*rakashanai pama social media*' ['*fight against each other on social media*'] (ZimStones, 2018).

The attacks that appear on social media have been exacerbated by Zimbabwe's complex political situation (Dendere, 2019). The tense online political arena sees the ZANU-PF side, known as '*varakashi*' ('*warriors*') coming into conflict with CCC supporters, '*nerrorists*' (combining '*Nero*' – a common nickname for Nelson Chamisa – and '*terrorist*') (Marima, 2019). In addition to the typical tensions between parties, the New Dispensation has seen several events that have generated much interest and debate on social media. These include the harmonised elections in 2018 and by-elections in 2019 and 2022. In 2019, the 'stay away' protest resulted in an internet shutdown, leadership changes in the major opposition parties, and the creation of the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter hashtag, as shown in Box 1 .

> Box 1: #ZimbabweanLivesMatter
>
> #Zimbabweanlivesmatter was a social media movement drawing attention to human rights abuses in the country. Modelled after the Black Lives Matter protests seen around the globe in May 2020, the campaign started in July/August 2023, following a crackdown by security forces that included the arrests of prominent political activists, journalists and authors, including author Tsitsi Dangarembga, and politicians Fadzayi Mahere and Joanah Mamombe. The hashtag was the top trending topic in the nation and had over 700,000 tweets in August 2020 (Ndhlovu, 2020). The hashtag, which was shared by politicians and celebrities across the world, included calls for Zimbabwe's suspension from the African Union (Chingono, 2020).

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2 While we recognise that 'Twitter' is now called 'X', this change took place during the research and most participants referred to it as 'Twitter'. For simplicity, we will use the name 'Twitter' throughout this briefing note.

The violent and conflict-filled nature of Zimbabwe's online space has led to efforts to ensure its regulation and close monitoring. The Government created the Ministry of Information Communication Technology and Cyber Security in 2009, now known as the Ministry of Information Communication Technology and Courier Services. The Ministry has been central to the passing of the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act.

While the main role of the Act is to curb online criminal activity, a former deputy minister said it is also designed to stop the spread of fake news:

> 'the [Act] will also address some behaviour that seeks to infringe on the rights of other people such as the spreading of nude pictures or any information that will tarnish a person's image.'
> *Former Deputy Minister Energy Mutodi, cited in Matare, 2019*

The Act modified the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act to introduce Sections 164B and 164C, which criminalise cyberbullying and harassment.

While no arrests have been made so far under this Act, people have been arrested for online comments in the past. In 2021, Fadzayi Mahere, an independent parliamentary candidate in the 2018 elections, and now spokesperson for the opposition CCC, was arrested after posting a video of a woman being beaten by the police while she had a baby strapped to her back. She claimed the baby had been killed. In 2023, she was convicted of 'communicating falsehoods' after police confirmed that the baby had not died (Chingono, 2023).

Research objectives

Given the importance of social media in Zimbabwean politics and the lack of insight about its use by women in local politics, the objectives of the study are to:

- document the nature of OVAW-P, using social media platforms for politicking

- understand the gender and cultural norms that underpin OVAW-P in social media spaces

- evaluate the implications of OVAW-P for women's political participation in Zimbabwe, with a particular focus on differences and commonalities between national- and local-level governance

- document the coping mechanisms of women politicians and activists related to OVAW-P

- assess the potential of the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act to protect women effectively against OVAW-P.

Methodology

The study utilised a multi-method approach informed by exploratory design and netnography, which seeks to understand online behaviours and activities through systematic observation and the analysis of online data (Kozinets et al., 2014). For this study, this entailed the review of social media accounts of female politicians and activists. Additional data were gathered using questionnaires and the result of interviews with 37 purposively sampled female politicians and activists, summarised in Table 1. Questionnaires were administered online and physically by four researchers. Of those interviewed, 26 (70%) had run for election in rural constituencies, which aligns with population trends, with 61% of the nation's population living in rural areas (Zimstat, 2022). Three respondents were political activists who had not been formally aligned with a political party and who had no declared plans to run for office. Instead, they would politick as private citizens in support of political parties and provide commentary on political events.

While women in politics in Zimbabwe share many gendered experiences, they also have other identities that intersect – and in some cases increase – their vulnerability to harm. As a result, this study has also examined age, location, ethnicity, class and the way in which these identities intersect with gender and each other to create multi-dimensional and complex experiences with OVAW-P.

Interviews took place between April and June 2023 and were conducted in English, Shona and Ndebele, depending on the preference of the participant. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes and one hour. Four participants preferred to receive the questionnaire via WhatsApp. They responded via voice notes to researchers and communicated back and forth via WhatsApp with the researcher to clarify any questions that were left unanswered.

Table 1: Interview participants

Political party	Authority	Number of interviews conducted
ZANU-PF	Local	5
	National	12
Main opposition parties (CCC and MDC)	Local	0
	National	10
Independent	Local	4
	National	3
Activist		3
Total		37

Source: Primary data.

Key informant interviews were conducted with eight stakeholders comprised of members of the government gender machineries, representatives of non-governmental and civil society organisations that advance women's political rights, and leaders of women's wings within Zimbabwe's political parties. Researchers also scraped the social media accounts of politicians on the two most-used social media sites in the country, Facebook and Twitter, as summarised in Table 2.[3]

After confirming the identity and social media accounts of women who ran for election in 2018, the scraping scrutinised posts to these accounts from January 2018 to February 2023. The aim was to capture posts around the 2018 elections, by-elections, and the promulgation of the Cyber and Data Protection Act. Overall, the accounts of 85 different women were scraped.

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3   Social media scraping is a process of automatically extracting data from social media platforms.

Table 2: Number of accounts per political parties used for online scraping

Political party	Facebook	Twitter	Number of women with both Facebook and Twitter accounts
ZANU-PF	11	14	6
Main opposition parties (CCC and MDC)	16	34	4
Independent	11	17	8
Total	38	65	18

Source: Primary data.

National-level politicians (MPs, Senators and Ministers) were drawn from both rural and urban constituencies and local politicians (councillors and council candidates) were drawn from urban constituencies. The distribution of accounts by their location is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Rural and urban distribution of online scraping

Type of constituency		Number of politicians' accounts scraped
Urban only	Local	18
	National	32
Rural	National	13
Both urban and rural	National (presidential)	5
	National (cabinet)	3
	Provincial (minister of state and senators)	16
Total		85

Source: Primary data.

Twitter accounts were scraped using Octoparse, and Facebook accounts via instant data scraper. Researchers analysed the resulting data manually, organising comments by category of type of violence. This manual organising was necessary as many comments were in local and vernacular language and the researchers wanted to ensure nothing was missed as a result of language barriers.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, researchers scraped data only from politicians' public accounts. Data about the politicians from other accounts or locked accounts, particularly on Facebook, were not collected or analysed. As a result, researchers were unable to examine how politicians were being discussed at a wider scale. Similarly, the research was unable to access deleted accounts and deleted posts. Because the research had a long time-frame, some posts and accounts have since been deleted from the apps, meaning that some of the discourse could not be analysed.

Second, the scraping tools used produced spreadsheets that cannot reproduce images, including photos and memes. Alternative text-image descriptions are not yet in common use in Zimbabwe and this limited the analysis of non-textual interactions. Some images were captured through manual searches of accounts, however this was only possible for a small number of images when researchers were seeking to corroborate information gathered from interviews.

Third, no opposition politicians at local level were interviewed in rural areas. The majority of participants represented rural constituencies, which are overwhelmingly ZANU-PF led. However, the lack of opposition voices in interviews was compensated by their representation in the scraping, where the majority of social media accounts were those of opposition politicians.

Finally, the research took place at the beginning of the 2023 election cycle, making it difficult to locate interview participants who were campaigning in primaries. Key informants were also busy with engagement events linked to the election cycle.

While the research had limitations, the study provides relevant and timely information about OVAW-P in Zimbabwe. The interviews, in particular, bridged the gap in information that could not be obtained via social media scraping, as politicians provided researchers with descriptions of their first-hand experiences with OVAW-P. Key informants added their expert knowledge on structural issues related to OVAW-P, further strengthening the research.

Key findings

'Once people's trust and respect is lost due to these false social media posts, it becomes difficult for a female politician to make it, because the public determines who rules and who does not.'

Use of social media by women politicians and activists

The study noted varied uses of social media by female politicians. For some, their social media accounts predated their political careers, for example, 30 (46%) of Twitter accounts analysed were created before 2018. They have, therefore, been using these platforms for different types of posts, including updates on their lives and that of their families, such as posts on marriages, birthdays, the births of children and grandchildren and graduations. The use of Facebook for political purposes alone was similar on both platforms, but personal use alone was more likely on Facebook than on Twitter – 38% to 8%, respectively – as shown in Figures 1 and 2.
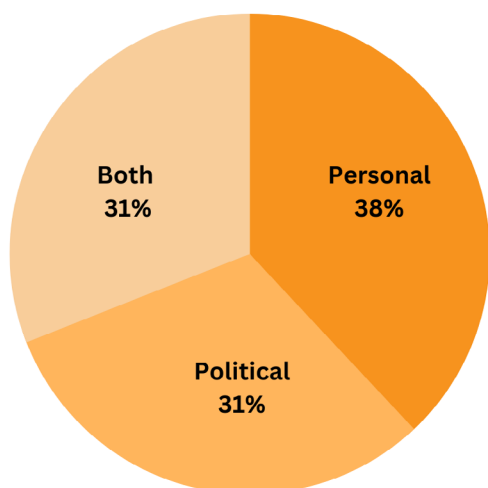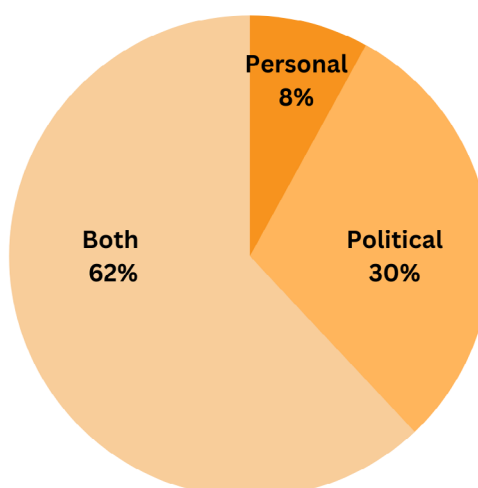
Figure 1: Use of Facebook

Both 31% · Personal 38% · Political 31%

Figure 2: Use of Twitter

Personal 8% · Both 62% · Political 30%

Some politicians and activists use social media to engage with their followers or friends on common areas of interest. While these posts are general, they are sometimes intertwined with political issues. Before they became politicians, women's political posts were more like commentaries on particular topics, but their posts became increasingly focused on policies as their interest in being active in politics grew. During campaign seasons, for example, many political posts were in favour of women politicians and other candidates associated with them, either because of their formal political affiliation (party or consortium) or because they were people with whom they had a prior relationship outside of social media.

One politician who changed her style of posts is Kirsty Coventry, the Minister of Sports, Arts and Recreation. Before she went into politics, her posts were mostly about her engagements in the sports world and her efforts to encourage young people to take part in sport. After her appointment as minister, while she continued to include personal updates, her posts shifted to mostly updates about the work of the Ministry and the Government.[4]

One candidate who ran for office stated that her entry into politics and the subsequent change in the way in which she engaged online triggered a new level of vitriol against her. Those who were familiar with her social media account a decade before she joined politics could not accept that her interests had changed. She was among the first group of Zimbabweans to join social media, calling herself and the others online at that point 'twelders', a combination of twitter and elders. The 'twelders' are Twitter users who created their accounts in the first years of the platform. One of them said:

> 'When I came back, I came back during a time when I was asserting myself as a politician. So now, there are those who knew the old account, those that don't believe that people grow up... But there are those that refused that I can come back and be mature and serious about things. They would always remind me '*oh remember this chick on Twitter, oh she thinks she knows everything*' when I was running, so many people felt affronted not because of... actually most people on Twitter don't know me personally but they felt affronted because they were like '*how dare she run?*"

Our research did not find separate accounts for personal use and political use. Rather than multiple Twitter or Facebook accounts for private and public use, some politicians had a public Twitter account and a private Facebook account.

The study also found that social media was used for politicking mostly by women in urban areas. Participants in our interviews, however, indicated that they also use WhatsApp for personal and political purposes. WhatsApp is widely used in the country, accounting for 50% of all internet traffic, and is becoming a good resource to help politicians reach their constituents (Bowles et al., 2020). One politician said:

> 'I always try to shy away from Twitter, from Facebook, from Instagram, etc. The only social media that I use most in politics is WhatsApp.'

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4   In all, 14 ministries have social media accounts, six of which were created before 2018, and they have been led by different ministers. As official ministry accounts, they highlight the work of the ministries, regardless of who is the leader.

While the WhatsApp platform started as an instant messaging service, its uses have adapted to include features that are on other social media sites. These include stories, which are temporary messages, and videos that can reach everyone in the user's contacts, groups with up to 1,024 members, and subscribers to newsletters (WhatsApp, 2023).

As politicians already use WhatsApp regularly for personal purposes, it is easy for them to use the features of WhatsApp for political purposes to contact voters and constituents. Even for those who do not make active use of WhatsApp for politics, the service is still useful to help them follow discussions in their area. As one woman said:

> 'I'm not the one who actually uses WhatsApp, but you discover that once you contribute something in parliament, the journalists will pick that issue and will write a story about you. So you find out that in WhatsApp.'

WhatsApp is considered a cheaper option than Facebook and Twitter for many activists and women politicians who rely on informal trading, as internet providers in Zimbabwe provide WhatsApp data bundles at a lower cost (Econet, 2023). Facebook and Twitter are used mainly by those in urban areas. The overrepresentation of urban politicians, particularly those in the two largest cities, has been credited to the high numbers of young people using social media in those areas (Dendere, 2019). Respondents to this study said that they use these platforms to reach out to their supporters and followers for political debates and campaigns.

Online violence against women in politics: An interplay of gender and cultural norms

Our study found that women of all ethnicities, ages and political party affiliations were targeted by violence on their social media accounts. Online violence against women in high government positions was lower: this was, in part, because of the more limited engagement of these politicians with people's posts, which reduces the attacks. This pattern has been noted in other studies, where political women may post and engage only rarely, yet still occupy space in the online arena through mentions by others (Bardall et al., 2018). Our analysis found little direct vitriol on the accounts of the most well-known women in politics, such as political party leaders. However, the gendered violence was more pronounced for party members without powerful government positions.

One key finding is that the more women politicians interact via social media, the greater the likelihood of OVAW-P. The times of increased interaction overlap with key political moments, such as the 2018 elections and the January 2019 shutdown. In 2018, Facebook and Twitter accounts saw the most posts, in general, as politicians posted campaign materials for themselves and their party's presidential candidate, if there was one.

This generated some push back. One former candidate, for example, was attacked because she challenged male political leaders about inconsistencies in the nomination processes of their party. The people who sent sexist responses to her posts were supporters of her former political party, and no longer supported her because she was now an independent candidate.

Similarly, during the January 2019 social media shutdown most of the comments on politicians' social media posts were from Zimbabweans abroad. After the shutdown, a ZANU-PF affiliated minister posted a message saying she empathised with the suffering of ordinary Zimbabweans. In response, she was inundated with comments of her being a '*mutengesi*' (sellout) and a '*silly little girl*'. Prior to her involvement in politics, she was beloved by the majority of Zimbabweans but she became a target of violence once she aligned herself with one party.

Some women in areas where the majority Shona ethnic and language groups co-exist with several historically disadvantaged minority groups, have been attacked as a result of institutionalised tribalism, as regions heavily populated with minority ethnic and language groups tend to be less developed (Ndhlovu, 2021; Sibanda, 2022; Moyo, 2023). Zimbabwe is led by people from the Shona ethnicities who account for 80% of the population, and government offices and services are centred in the capital, which is located in an area that is heavily Shona speaking. One minister was attacked because she was not seen as a proper member of a particular ethnic group, and was being installed by the government because she was a member of the political party that communities blame for the marginalisation of their region.

OVAW-P has taken the form of sexualised attacks, body shaming, attacks on women for failing in their duties as mothers, ageism and account hacking. Each of these forms of violence – all of them rooted in social and gender norms – are discussed below.

Sexualised attacks

Women politicians and activists have experienced unwanted sexualised comments from commentators, including ordinary citizens and fellow male politicians. Sexualised comments, using metaphors for eating or food, were typically found on images posted by the women leaders. They were often inundated with messages such as '*who is eating here*?', '*Would you want to be touched by a hand like this?*', '*food for the senior politicians*'. In local colloquial languages, the food being discussed is the women themselves, meaning they will be eaten or enjoyed by men – the implication being that the women politicians are sex objects for men. Such comments were made to three opposition and independent politicians in our study who were participating in politics for the first time.

Other attacks portrayed women leaders as useless beings whose political survival is hinged on using their sexuality. The majority of the women interviewed had suffered such attacks whenever they were appointed to positions or mentioned in news stories. One independent politician said:

> 'You see other women politicians being called all kinds of things because people say they are sleeping with the president of the party. And that the only reason why they get a nomination is because they are the mistress of …'

While the gender of the people posting was not always clear, as many indigenous names are not gendered and people either have no photo on their social media accounts or just photos of their preferred political candidates, interviewees said that men were the most likely to bully them online. As mentioned earlier in this briefing note, men are more likely to be on social media in Zimbabwe, (Kemp, 2023), which increases the likelihood that they will dominate politicians' interactions with their followers. One interviewee said:

> 'So at every turn in 2017 and 2018 you'd find some troll, unfortunately a man, saying one weird thing.'

This view of men as primary abusers on social media was not, however, universal. Serving MPs also discussed the vitriol they faced from other women when the Marriages Act was being discussed, with one saying:

> 'It was really bad when the Marriages Act was passed. Even in church groups, people were calling it a '*bill remahure*' (bill for whores) because it gave rights to people in civil partnerships.'

Another woman added:

> 'Women in groups were saying next time they shouldn't vote for women because they do not support the rights of married women. They called us the mistresses and told us that the reason why we supported such laws was so we can take everything they [the wives] would have worked for.'

There were persistent accusations that women politicians, particularly those who were unmarried, were having relations with married men, with comments such as '*Hapana zvaanoziva ihure ra* [male leader] ('*there's nothing that she knows, she's* [male leader's] *whore*'). One key informant added:

> 'Whether or not that's true, what's interesting is that people always say that people are sleeping their way to the top. No one says anything about the men in positions of power who use those positions to abuse women.'

Sexualised attacks rooted in marriage and sexual abstinence stem from the gender norms that see the place of women as being in the marital home. Therefore, all those women who defy this expectation by entering politics are viewed as morally bankrupt. International IDEA (2021) concluded that the first yardstick for judging women seeking political office becomes morality, regardless of how male counterparts may behave. This categorisation of women politicians as unfaithful, promiscuous or sexualized has been used repeatedly to intimidate women and drive them back into the private sphere (NDI, 2020).

Body image

Tied to sexualised attacks, women politicians are also attacked on the basis of their bodies, their looks, their hair, or the way they dress, rather than their ideas and beliefs. One interviewee said she could not count how many times she had been called ugly and unattractive. She explained:

> 'every name you can think of to describe how bad I look, I have heard it.'

The results of our social media scraping revealed that such comments are common. They included '*you are shapeless*' and '*you are formless*'. Photos of women were also reposted so that others could shame them. These could be photos taken from unflattering angles or pictures that were photo-shopped to add beards, pimples and other unappealing additions so that the women could be mocked even more.

The negative comments against women's bodies take on elements that can be linked to race, class and colourism. The language often dehumanises women politicians, with the study recording such comments as:

> 'You are as ugly as a Chimpanzee, we don't need you to lead us, go back to the zoo madam.'

While women of all ages and political party affiliations face hateful language, women who have darker skin and are bigger in size were particularly attacked through the language of bathing, with comments such as:

> 'Go and bath first before you come to tell us you can develop our constituency.'

One woman's account is inundated with comments such as: '*Mvura nesipo*' (water and soap) and '*Chimbonaiwai atete, tozotaura machena*' (go and get rained on auntie and we can talk after you're clean). Rather than engaging with her arguments, people instead insult her body and tell her that she is dirty. In contrast, women with lighter skin are praised. On Facebook, a politician with lighter skin had a comment on her photo saying, '*ganda remunhu anogeza*' (the skin of a person who bathes). This provided an example of a woman who is thought to be beautiful as clean, and one who is not, either in her physicality or ideas, as dirty.

The correlation between dark skin and uncleanliness stems from white supremacy, which has established Eurocentric standards as desirable (Hill Collins, 2000). As a former colony of the United Kingdom and a former settler colonial state, Zimbabwe has inherited some of those ideas. This means that the characteristics of fair skin and a thin body is seen as an ideal standard. As women move further away from the Western standard of beauty, by having darker skin, bigger bodies and African facial features, their struggle for acceptance and respect increases (Hill Collins, 2000).

Eurocentric views are not limited to ways bodies look, but also the way they smell. Racial stereotypes claimed that Black people had a bad odour that was linked with their environment (Tullett, 2016). Because of the association of race and odour, Black people themselves internalised the idea that being clean and free of odour would make them more desirable and help them to assimilate (Ferranti, 2011). For Black women, cleanliness became a sign of respectability.

Attacks on motherhood and familial roles of women politicians

The most hateful language aimed at women politicians in Zimbabwe – as often found in other countries – centres on their personal life, including their roles as mothers. One politician has been attacked because of her son's substance abuse, an issue that affects many youths in urban areas and something she has been open about. One comment read, '*When you can't reign in your son's drug usage, how can you lead us as citizens*?' As one respondent explained:

> 'You hear people talking of your failed marriages, and judging you to be a failure because of your marriage breakdown.'

Krook (2017) noted that accusations of being a bad wife, mother, or daughter can serve as a way to damage a woman's political career, as well as impact her personal life. This is particularly the case if the culture is one where a women's honour is connected with her family, as in Zimbabwe.

This study found that the attacks on women's familial roles changed in nature, depending on their age. However, the overall belief is that there is no 'right age' for women to be involved in politics: they are either young, inexperienced and infantilised, or old and out of touch. A younger politician was told:

> 'Go and get married first, if you succeed in having a husband that can marry you, and you get the chance to head a household then you have experience in politicking.'

However, an older politician was told:

> 'Your grandchildren are looking for someone to tell them folktales and you're here!'

Whether young or old, women face discrimination because of their age and their expected roles in the family. Being an older woman does not mean that one will be automatically treated with respect, despite the fact that Zimbabwe has gerontocratic societies: cultures that revere elders. For women in politics, being older is often an obstacle as they are told that politics is not for them anymore and they should retire to let others have an opportunity, as shown in Box 2.

Box 2: Ageism

A key informant for this study raised the double standards associated with age when it comes to women, using the example of the 2018 primary elections in one opposition parliamentary constituency. This constituency had been served by a woman for two terms and she was, in general, well-respected. During the primary, she announced that she would be withdrawing her nomination because of irregularities in the process. Another woman became the frontrunner and would go on to win the nomination and the seat. After the politician announced her withdrawal and her intention to run as an independent, she faced many attacks on social media, including many that focused on her age and how it was time for her to move aside gracefully and let another young woman step into the role.

These attacks included tweets that said '*magarisa ambuya ipaivo vazukuru chitsvimbo*' (you've stayed too long grandma, give grandchildren the chance to lead) and '*une zvidukurumwa* (you throw) *tantrums too much*'.

While men also experience ageism, coupling ageist attacks with comments about tantrums and words such as '*gogo*' and '*ambuya*' (both terms for grandmother) gives the comments a gendered tone.

Equally, youth is no guarantee of political success. While Zimbabwe's political leadership has been mainly older, the country's population is young. In all, 67% of the population is under the age of 35. In Parliament, however, this age group accounted for less than 3% of elected parliamentarians in 2018 (Mpofu, 2023).

Hacking

Some female politicians were victims of cloning of their social media accounts, meaning that fake profiles were created by stealing their personal information, including pictures and other identifiers. These cloned accounts are used to trick unsuspecting followers into believing that they are looking at the original account of the female politician and are scammed. Consequently, the reputation of the politician is tarnished. As one female politician recalled:

> 'The fake Twitter account was used to tarnish my image and beg money from my followers to bankroll a political campaign. I realised it when people started telling me about the page and I disassociated myself from it.'

Considering that women politicians are often viewed as a group that lacks resources and have limited access to financial resources for campaigning, many social media commentators come to believe such pleas are genuine. This reinforces a view among social media users that women are too weak and under-resourced to lead. At the time of the research, three hacked social media accounts were identified: one on Facebook and two on Twitter.

The impact of online violence against women in politics

OVAW-P has a negative impact on women politicians in a number of ways. It can damage their mental health and their personal and family lives, thereby tarnishing their political image still further. It also promotes digital exclusion by driving women offline, hampering their political careers and reinforcing the gender and cultural norms that prejudice female leadership.

Our study has confirmed the impact of OVAW-P on mental and emotional health is substantial, especially in relation to self-esteem and confidence. As one participant stated:

> 'It's hard being bombarded with negativity all the time. It takes a toll on you and not just emotionally. Even your body feels tired because of what people are saying.'

The threat of physical violence also causes psychological trauma, insomnia and, ultimately, mental health issues such as stress, depression, anxiety and panic attacks. Most of the interviewees who had experienced OVAW-P were taking blood pressure medication. One stated:

> 'I have been prescribed antidepressants by my doctor after showing signs of depression due to the victimisation I was getting online.'

Taking a stance against OVAW-P directed at oneself or another person can lead to more violent rhetoric against women politicians. One minister, for example, posted that she wished people would be kinder on social media after she had received negative comments. In response to the post, she received comments such as '*idyai makanyarara minister... Tajaira*' (eat quietly minister... we're used to it) and '*Shame attention seeker. FO*'. The first comment implies that she is corrupt and stealing from the country while the second example minimises an experience that she was vulnerable enough to share with the public. Similar interactions were present on other women's posts. This was evident when they would write in support of another woman facing GBV and their activism would be questioned, for example '*but honorable Joana Akanzi hure raChamisa munewspaper hamuna kuita comment*' (but when Honourable Joana was called Chamisa's whore in the newspaper, you didn't make a comment).

OVAW-P damages women's personal and family life when their family and friends are attacked because of their association with the politician. As one study participant said

> 'My parents aren't on Twitter or Facebook but they heard about how the family was attacked, and even their names being dragged into the mud, and were not happy about me and my participation.'

Some politicians reported that, as a result of their actions on social media, their own children were being bullied at school. Such children have been told that their mothers are '*vatengesi*' (sellouts) '*maHure*' (whores), and ugly.

Responding to online violence against women in politics

Ultimately, female politicians complained that OVAW-P tarnishes their image and has a negative impact on their political careers. One commentator stated that:

> 'What has been written about you on social media whether true or false affects how society views you. It damages your reputation and political career.'

Indeed, the perspectives of some supporters about female politicians have changed as a result of rumours spread on social media. Once one female politician's private images or alleged pictures are leaked, nasty comments are made and this, in turn, affects their reputation. With the impossibility of ever erasing things entirely from the internet, defamation rumours and images can haunt women forever, keeping them from ever making it in politics. Given the patriarchal nature of society, it is women who are affected most when this happens.

Some women politicians reported that they have contemplated quitting to avoid putting their children and family at risk. In some instances, they have ended up deleting their social media accounts to focus on offline politicking. One woman politician cited an example of a political activist who deleted her accounts after being threatened by a former partner with the release of private images. She explained:

> '... this young girl was in a relationship with a man who's also active online. After a disagreement, he started threatening her with publishing pictures she had sent him while they were together. The girl has since deactivated her account. The man's profiles are still active across different social media platforms.'

If women politicians cannot be on social media, they cannot engage online with their burgeoning and youthful constituents. One politician said she was not using social media for political purposes because of the bullying she suffered in recent years. Because she cannot be online, she has to rely on other methods of communication with her constituents. She said:

> 'I mostly just rely on traditional forms of communication... talking to them directly, communicating with them directly, through a telephone call, text messages, and basically just talking to them under a tree and talking and relaxing and drinking mahewu with them.'

While this protects her from online violence, she is now limited in terms of how many people she can engage with at any one time. Such approaches also limit the engagement of women politicians with their electorates in cyberspace.

Some female candidates indicated that they create 'ghost' accounts to fight their opponents by debunking myths and falsehoods. They use these to provide explanations and evidence of the correct narrative. In some instances, women politicians explained that this involves defending female candidates by educating social media users on why women should partake in politics. This is something they could not do by using their genuine accounts because abusers are encouraged to keep on attacking when the person attacked seems to be responding.

Reporting to authorities

A small number of women politicians turned to the police to report cases of OVAW-P. In previous studies, Zimbabwean women have said that official reporting to social media companies has not been effective in reducing OVAW-P. This chimes with the experience of Linda Masarira, who ran for a parliamentary seat on an opposition ticket. As she comments in Marima (2019:7):

> 'Most of the abuse on Facebook and Twitter is written in vernacular, the Facebook team said they are going to look into it and ensure that they employ Shona and other vernacular languages translators to deal with abuse in vernacular… Twitter response time is too long and they have too many demands to pull an article of fake identity down.'

Women politicians who sought recourse to justice include the few educated female MPs and women in organisations dealing with politics who understood the available mechanisms for their protection, including the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act. The parliamentarians interviewed were quick to mention that they had been part of the team that promulgated this law and were, as a result, privy to the contents of the act that prohibits cyber violence. Many of those who were aware of this Act view it as a well-developed and comprehensive law that should, largely, protect women against OVAW-P.

The few who reported their cases to police, however, complained of snail-paced progress in their cases. Indeed, the study found limited jurisprudence on OVAW-P issues in Zimbabwe because of a lack of evidence and the limited expertise of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary in apprehending and prosecuting such cases.

Although there is support for the 2021 Act, there are questions as to who it is made for. Some women, while welcoming the Act and its potential to curb OVAW-P, wondered if it was created to benefit them or to protect men from embarrassment. One woman said:

> 'I think this was put into place for men because over the last years, there has been a lot of exposure on social media. Because these things have been happening to Zimbabwean women since time immemorial, left, right and centre, but suddenly, in the last I'd say 2 to 3 years, there's been an increase in the number of people coming [online to discuss private affairs]. I think [name] was one of the women who came online and shared A WHOLE list of [sexual] activities with various powerful men. And suddenly a bunch of powerful men think whew, we really need to look at this whole data protection. We need to take this seriously.'

Nevertheless, the majority of women politicians in this study who were not currently serving in parliament were not aware of the new legal protections against cyber violence. As a result, they suffered in silence without any recourse to justice. The bulk of these politicians are local authority councillors and candidates who participated in and lost national races.

Women politicians who managed to report cases also complained of the difficulties faced by law enforcement when it comes to apprehending abusers. This is because social media is free and

allows abusers to create accounts with fake details. The challenge in reporting to police was linked to the lack of a serious focus on issues of OVAW-P and demonstrates how unequal gender norms are embedded in the existing political structures.

One key informant said that this is because of the violent nature of Zimbabwean politics. The physical offline violence perpetrated against people in politics is treated far more seriously than the online violence faced by women politicians. However, as one participant said:

> 'this isn't something that just happens online. This happens in corporate boardrooms. This happens in civic spaces. This happens in families. If a woman dares to say no, this is my opinion. Or these are the fact of the matter, she's met with all sorts of violence. Verbal violence, sometimes physical violence.'

Positive campaigns for women in politics

In a few rare instances, the social media community rallied around women facing violence and attacks. Thinking back on an encounter with another former candidate, one woman recalled how, after being insulted and called names by the man, she went on Twitter and shared the screenshots to show people '*how a politician treats other people*'. As Twitter users rallied to her defence, the man sent an apology, which was not accepted. The candidate said:

> 'he wasn't apologising to me. He was apologising because other men were offended. He didn't care about what he did to me. What he said is exactly what he thinks of me.'

Although it is uncommon for those who share their vitriol online to express regret for the harm they have caused, other women have defended those who are attacked, either commenting on the posts or writing their own posts. During the 2018 campaign, Thokozani Khupe, a presidential candidate was a victim of multiple incidence of political violence. In May 2023 as she and Nelson Chamisa clashed in factional battles over their party's name and symbols, and she was verbally attacked by people in party regalia who followed her to her car shouting '*sellout*' and '*hure*' (whore) at her. In response, other women politicians came to her defence. One candidate wrote on Twitter:

> 'I cannot accept the abuse of women, or men for any reason. There's simply no excuse whatsoever for sexist hate speech and intimidation – none! Not politics, not anger, nothing! That's why our Constitution guarantees rights to dignity Sec 51, protection from inhuman and degrading treatment Sec 53, psychological integrity and protection from all violence forms Sec 52, equal protection and benefit of the law sec 56. Plus Sec 95(1)(a) of the Criminal Code makes it a criminal offence to criminally insult: impair another's dignity as was done to @Khupe. Sad!'

Several comments under the post from men and women across the political divide commented in support of the original post and in defence of Khupe.

Conclusion

Women politicians in Zimbabwe's local and national governance structures experience varied forms of online violence on social media platforms. These include sexualised violence, body image attacks, threats of violence, and hacking. OVAW-P stems from patriarchal misogynist attitudes and gender norms that deride women as an inferior sex. These norms assume that women's place remains in the home, while men are glorified as leaders who allow women to rise in politics through sexual favours.

Women who defy the odds are ridiculed, which reduces their self-esteem, psychological wellbeing, confidence and, ultimately, their participation in cyberspace. The implication of OVAW-P is the removal of social media accounts or the limiting of women's political engagement via these platforms. This, in turn, has a negative impact on the pursuit of equal, truly democratic representation.

The plight of many women politicians is exacerbated by their limited knowledge of protection mechanisms, including the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act. Even those who have such knowledge and who have tried to report cyber violence to the police have complained of a lack of action.

Recommendations

A wide range of stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, corporates and individuals have a role in making online spaces safer for women politicians. The study findings suggest the following actions to be taken by these various stakeholders.

The Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development should raise awareness on OVAW-P. Awareness raising has been shown to challenge the harmful social norms that propel gender-based violence and to support positive norms (UN Women and Prevention Collaborative, 2021). Awareness raising could target the general public through, for example, radio programmes, roadshows and outreach on OVAW-P and the legal consequences for engaging in violent rhetoric. It could also target political parties and leaders to address the patriarchal control tendencies that fuel the gender and social norms that undermine women's participation online. Further research is needed to identify the most effective methods for such interventions.

The government and relevant ministries should strengthen the knowledge and capacities of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary, such as police officers, prosecutors and magistrates, in investigating and prosecuting OVAW-P. This should go hand-in-hand with the implementation of survivor-sensitive and human rights-based approaches. They should also seek an alignment of GBV laws and policies to include regulations on expected conduct on social media.

Civil-society organisations and government agencies should strengthen the digital literacy skills of women politicians and activists to effectively counter O-VAWP. These skills could include the ability to secure their accounts and to report and block accounts, including ghost accounts that perpetrate OVAW-P. Civil-society organisations should extend psychosocial support in the form of counselling services to women survivors of cyber violence to minimise its negative impacts on their emotional health and wellbeing.

Future research should expand beyond the examination of politicians' accounts to the analysis of all uses of their names and hashtags. As stated by some interviewees, even if they are not active on social media, their names may still be mentioned and they may still be subjected to abuse. Research that includes searches on people's names will provide more and useful information.

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