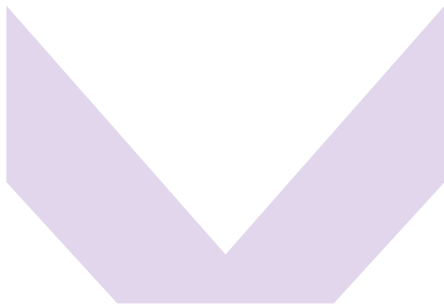


The role of political parties in addressing VAWP and gendered disinformation in Kenya

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About the author

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List of acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
APU	African Parliamentary Union
CoK	Constitution of Kenya
CREAW	Centre for Rights Education and Awareness
CSO(s)	Civil Society Organization(s)
DCI	Directorate of Criminal Investigations
FIDA	Federation of Women Lawyers (Kenya)
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IEBC	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
KEWOPA	Kenya Women Parliamentary Association
MCA	Member of the County Assembly
NGEC	National Gender and Equality Commission
NPS	National Police Service
ODPP	Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions
ORPP	Office of the Registrar of Political Parties
PPDT	Political Parties Disputes Tribunal
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
UN	United Nations
VAWP	Violence Against Women in Politics

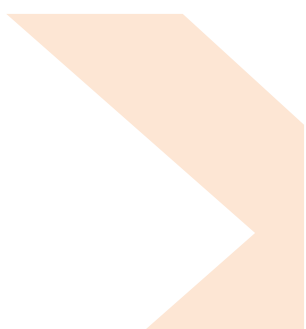


1.0 Executive Summary

Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP), including gendered disinformation, is a pervasive and escalating threat to women's political participation and Kenya's democratic integrity. Despite constitutional and legal frameworks supporting gender equality, women in Kenyan politics continue to face a spectrum of violence—psychological, sexual, physical, economic, and digital—rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms, weak institutional accountability, and pervasive cultures of patriarchy and impunity. The rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and gendered disinformation has amplified these threats, making online spaces hostile and deterring women from seeking or retaining political office.

Political parties, as gatekeepers of political participation, have a distinct responsibility to prevent and address VAWP but are hampered by several challenges, including the persistence of a culture of patriarchy, inadequate internal mechanisms, lack of resources, and insufficient political will, among other challenges. The cumulative impact is a chilling effect on women's political ambitions, underrepresentation in decision-making, erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, and a democracy that fails to reflect the needs of its entire population.

In recognition of the pervasive and multifaceted nature of VAWP in Kenya and its detrimental impact on women's human rights and political participation, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) commissioned research to investigate the role of political parties in addressing VAWP and gendered disinformation in the country. The study sought to understand the scale, forms, and drivers of VAWP, particularly as it affected women's political participation in both online and offline spaces. The results of the research would inform public discussion and policy dialogue, providing evidence-based insights to guide political parties, policymakers, and stakeholders in developing effective prevention and response strategies to VAWP ahead of the 2027 elections. Crucially, the research aimed to lay the foundations for concrete commitments by political parties ahead of the elections by equipping them with actionable recommendations to catalyze systemic change, dismantle barriers to women's political participation, and foster a more inclusive, resilient, and democratic political environment in Kenya.



Methodological note

This study employed a rigorous mixed-methods approach, strategically integrating complementary qualitative data collection and analysis techniques to yield a comprehensive understanding of VAWP in Kenya and the role of political parties in its prevention and mitigation. First, a systematic review of relevant literature was undertaken. This encompassed academic literature, governmental policy documents, internal documents of political parties, and publications from civil society organizations. The objective of this literature review was to identify the multifaceted nature of VAWP within the Kenyan political landscape. Subsequently, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of 24 key informants. This sample included women actively engaged in politics, both elected and non-elected officials, as well as those affiliated with political parties or identifying as independent candidates. Furthermore, the sample included individuals holding leadership positions within the identified political parties.¹

The interviews with women in politics aimed at eliciting direct experiences and lived realities relating to VAWP. These accounts were important in providing contextual and nuanced data on VAWP in Kenya, its manifestations, and their expert perspectives on effective strategies for prevention and response. Interviews with political party officials aimed to identify existing gaps and inherent challenges within party structures regarding the prevention and management of VAWP in Kenya.

Finally, two expert workshops were convened in Nairobi. The first workshop brought together representatives from a diverse spectrum of political parties. The second workshop engaged a broader range of key stakeholders, including representatives from government agencies, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and development partners. The main objective of these workshops was to critically validate the preliminary research findings derived from the literature review and key informant interviews. Further, the workshops provided additional, nuanced insights that were critical in the formulation of contextually grounded and actionable recommendations for effectively addressing the pervasive threat of VAWP in Kenya.

Key findings

1. VAWP, including gendered disinformation, is a pervasive and escalating threat to women's human rights, their political participation, and Kenya's democratic integrity more broadly.
2. Despite constitutional and legal frameworks supporting gender equality, women in Kenyan politics continue to face a spectrum of violence—psychological, sexual, physical, economic, and digital—rooted in entrenched patriarchal norms, weak institutional accountability, and pervasive cultures of patriarchy and impunity.
3. The rise of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and gendered disinformation has amplified traditional forms of violence, making online spaces hostile and deterring women from seeking or retaining political office.
4. Political parties, as gatekeepers of political participation, have a distinct responsibility to prevent and address VAWP. However, political parties in Kenya face numerous challenges in addressing VAWP, including enduring patriarchal cultures, inadequate internal mechanisms, lack of resources, and insufficient political will.
5. The cumulative impact of VAWP in Kenya is a chilling effect on women's political ambitions, underrepresentation in decision-making, erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, and a democracy that fails to reflect the needs and aspirations of its entire population.

Key recommendations

▪ Political Parties:

- Enforce a culture of zero tolerance against all forms of VAWP through strong internal policies, clear disciplinary measures, and systematic data collection.
- Challenge prevailing patriarchal cultures and normalize women's political participation through mandatory gender sensitivity, trainings and the appointment of women to senior party positions.
- Collaborate with other stakeholders, including CSOs, to provide referral pathways and services, including comprehensive short-term emergency support for survivors of VAWP, like gender desks, safe houses, legal aid, and psychosocial support.
- Adopt a multi-layered approach to address gendered disinformation by investing in research, training women in digital security and resilience, and advocating for contextual regulations and accountability for tech platforms.

▪ Women in Politics:

- Enhance individual physical and digital resilience and security through training, mentorship, and building robust support systems.
- Collectively advocate for a more secure environment through cross-party platforms, developing VAWP monitoring mechanisms, rapid response support networks, strategic communication, and organizing and demanding accountability from political parties.
- Raise awareness about the prevalence and negative consequences of VAWP at the party and public levels.

▪ **Government Agencies:**

- Prioritize the full implementation of laws prohibiting violence against women, women's political participation, and strengthen legislation around online violence.
- Enhance the capacity of institutions like NGECC, the Judiciary, ODPP, DCI, and NPS to effectively handle VAWP cases.
- Ensure comprehensive, accessible, and survivor-centered support systems for victims of VAWP are available nationwide.
- Invest in prevention and awareness-raising campaigns targeting patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes at both public and leadership levels.

▪ **Civil Society Organizations:**

- Undertake awareness-raising campaigns targeting diverse audiences on gender equality and patriarchal norms.
- Advocate for the development and robust implementation of laws and policies addressing VAWP.
- Monitor and document trends in VAWP to identify emerging gaps and hold duty bearers accountable.
- Provide direct support to survivors of VAWP, including legal aid, psychosocial support, and facilitating access to medical care.
- Lead coordinated regional efforts to share best practices in addressing VAWP, particularly in the digital space.

▪ **Media Organizations:**

- Report incidents of VAWP ethically, accurately, and gender-sensitively, avoiding the amplification of patriarchal narratives.
- Invest in regular training for journalists on gender-sensitive reporting and the dynamics of online and offline VAWP.
- Provide equitable and fair coverage to women in politics.

▪ **Social Media Platforms:**

- Invest in robust content moderation systems combining AI and human oversight, trained in local languages and socio-political nuances.
- Enhance transparency regarding policies, algorithms, and enforcement actions and make them more gender and context-sensitive.
- Enhance collaboration with other stakeholders, including academia, civil society, and government agencies, to strengthen safety for women in politics.
- Empower women in politics with adequate safety controls and support digital safety and resilience initiatives among them.

2.0 Introduction: Global democratic backsliding and its impact on VAWP

Democracy has long been recognized as a catalyst for societal advancement and women's political empowerment.² Research demonstrates that democratic institutions promote egalitarian gender attitudes, with mature democracies exhibiting 60% higher levels of gender equality compared to authoritarian regimes.³ The rule of law and electoral accountability mechanisms in democracies create structural pathways for women's participation, producing systems with fewer obstacles to female political candidates. At its core, democracy prioritizes the principles of equality, participation, and accountability, which directly translate into increased opportunities for women to engage in political processes, hold leadership positions, and influence policy decisions.⁴ When democratic institutions are robust, they provide mechanisms that safeguard women's rights and promote their inclusion. Some of these mechanisms entail fair elections, basic freedoms, and guarantees of women's safety, security, and meaningful participation.

Furthermore, democratic societies encourage cultures of inclusivity and diversity, both of which are critical for dismantling the patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes that have historically marginalized women in politics.⁵ When women constitute 30% or more of parliamentary bodies, they disproportionately advocate for policies enhancing healthcare access, education equity, and other anti-discrimination measures.⁶ Democratic electoral competition also incentivizes parties to address women's issues, creating feedback loops where political participation strengthens both gender equality and democratic resilience.⁷

In democracies, a wide range of actors, including civil society, political parties, women's rights

movements, and independent media, are vital in advocating for gender equality and holding governance to account. They do this by creating public awareness, auditing and demanding accountability from public institutions, and generally supporting an enabling environment for women to engage in leadership. Generally, the presence of women in political roles leads to the creation of policies and practices that better reflect the needs of the whole population, including, crucially, those of women in politics.

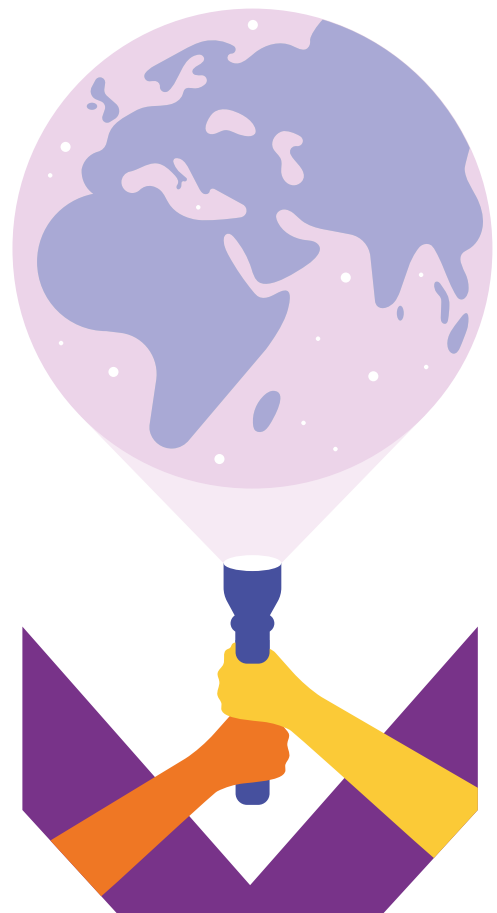
In recent years, however, many countries around the world are experiencing a worrying trend of democratic backsliding, a gradual decline in the quality of democracy where previously established democratic institutions, norms, and practices are systematically eroded.⁸ Democracy has been receding globally for approximately 16 years, with the proportion of countries classified as "free" plummeting from 46% in 2005 to just 20% in 2021.⁹ According to the V-Dem Report (2025), 42 countries worldwide are experiencing autocratization, with 71% of the global population now living under autocratic regimes—a significant increase from 48% just a decade ago.¹⁰

The current erosion of democratic norms and institutions threatens human rights through, among other ways, the weakening of electoral processes, the suppression of civil society, and the curtailment of freedom of expression. These changes create a hostile environment that disproportionately affects marginalized constituencies like women. As dictatorial tendencies rise, democratic institutions weaken, and freedoms get more restrained, the space for women's agency narrows. This is because the rise of totalitarianism weakens

structures that protect the rights of women, leading to discrimination and various forms of violence. In the long run, this undermines both political inclusivity and gender equality.

As women have made strides in political representation, there has been a corresponding backlash manifesting through various forms of violence, including increasingly, digital harassment.¹¹ This form of violence that targets women because of their participation in politics is referred to as Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP). VAWP is any act or threat of gender-based violence, coercion, or intimidation that targets women because of their political involvement or views.¹² VAWP can take various forms, such as physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence, and can occur in public or private spaces, online or offline.¹³ Some of the more common forms include physical violence (intimidation, harassment, kidnapping, physical assault, assassination), psychological and emotional violence (threats, blackmail, stalking, slander), sexual violence (harassment, objectification, unwanted advances, assault), and economic violence (restricted resource access, prejudices).

VAWP across the world remains a long-standing challenge that has, over the years, served to impede women's entry, retention, and effective participation in politics. While the phenomenon itself is not new, the rise and ubiquity of online platforms have profoundly amplified its reach, speed, and intensity. The digital space provides new, easily accessible vectors for perpetrating harassment, intimidation, disinformation, and gendered attacks, making VAWP a more pervasive and complex threat that transcends physical



boundaries and exacerbates existing barriers for women in the political arena.¹⁴ Online violence of this nature is referred to as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). According to the United Nations, technology-facilitated gender-based violence is "...a subset of gender-based violence that describes any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated, or amplified using information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms."¹⁵ Research has shown that as women make progress in gaining political representation, there is often a corresponding increase in violence against them.¹⁶

All over the world, women in politics experience relentless targeting online in the form of abuse, threats, and defamation campaigns on social media. These campaigns are designed to discredit, devalue, and delegitimize the political standing of women, with the goal of ultimately undermining their ability to participate in civic life. Because of this ecosystem, many women decide against running for office, self-censor, or refrain from speaking out, while illiberal actors become bolder in using social media as a tool to silence their opposition, roll back women's rights, and erode democratic institutions.

While TFGBV is a significant and pervasive issue affecting women in politics, it represents only one dimension of the broader threat they face. The experiences of women in political spaces go far beyond online abuse, encompassing coordinated campaigns that aim to discredit, silence, and ultimately exclude them from public life. This is referred to as gendered disinformation.

According to Judson & Ellen (2021), gendered disinformation concerns the creation and dissemination of content that encompasses gender-based attacks or weaponizes gender narratives to fulfil political, social, or economic goals.¹⁷ It involves falsity, malign intent, and often a degree of coordination. It takes many forms, including explicit imagery, graphic comments, and manipulated materials designed to damage a woman's reputation and undermine their leadership. This practice not only harms individual women but also serves political goals by portraying women as unreliable, incompetent, or even insane, thereby undermining their credibility and limiting their public and political participation.¹⁸ Ultimately, the proliferation of gendered disinformation creates a hostile environment that compromises the ability of women to engage meaningfully in politics, harming those currently active while simultaneously acting as a powerful deterrent to potential aspirants considering entry into the political space.¹⁹

According to #ShePersisted,²⁰ gendered disinformation is the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women political leaders and other female public figures, in a way that draws on misogyny and societal stereotypes around the role of women. It includes a combination of three vectors of threats facing women leaders on social media. These are;

- 1. Sexism, misogyny and the "manosphere".** The manosphere is an informal network of websites, forums and social media influencers promoting the concept of the "alpha male" and the embracing of intense ideological misogyny.
- 2. Online violence.** Including TFGBV such as threats, abuse, hate speech, harassment, and smear campaigns.
- 3. Disinformation.** Malign actors, artificial activity, coordinated influence operations, and fake news.

While sexism on the campaign trail is nothing new, digital technologies have, however, drastically amplified its scale and impact. Online platforms often escalate misogyny to the point of eroding social norms around inclusion and civil discourse, while normalizing abuse and shielding perpetrators from accountability. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement prioritize sensational and misleading content, making it easier than ever to organize, amplify, and fund information attacks against women. These attacks can reach millions within moments, shaping public opinion, undermining women's political participation, and influencing the trajectory of democratic processes.

Women's political rights are particularly vulnerable in fragile and nascent democracies like Kenya, where such protections have been more recently established and where civil society spaces to defend them are limited or shrinking.²¹ However, even in mature democracies that are de-democratizing like those of Europe and America, there is articulated opposition to gender equality and threats to previous gender policy gains. Autocratizing states in these regions have witnessed a 33% decline in egalitarian gender attitudes within four years, paralleled by increases in political violence against women that rose 52% between 2015-2022.²²

In Africa, where many of the democracies are nascent, violence against women in politics both on and offline is endemic and represents systemic barriers to not only exclude women from political power but also fundamentally degrade democratic institutions' capacity to represent social interests in a region where such capacities are especially needed. A 2021 study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the African Parliamentary Union (APU) found that sexism, harassment, and violence against women were ubiquitous in parliaments across Africa.²³ The study found that 80 per cent of the women parliamentarians interviewed had experienced psychological violence in parliament, while 67 per cent had been subject to sexist behaviour or remarks and 42 per cent had received death threats, rape threats, or threats of beating or abduction. A further 40 percent had been sexually harassed, and 23 percent had endured physical violence.²⁴ Most of the abuse was attributed to their male counterparts in parliament, more so those from rival political parties.

Within the political space, various actors are mandated to prevent and respond to VAWP. These include electoral bodies, government agencies, law enforcement institutions, civil society actors, and the public at large, including women. However, since VAWP primarily revolves around access to political power, political parties have the primary responsibility to prevent and respond since they shape political culture, set norms of behaviour, and control access to political power. As gatekeepers to candidacy, leadership, and policymaking, parties have the authority and responsibility to promote gender equality, enforce codes of conduct, and sanction abusive behaviour.²⁵

3.0 Key findings

3.1 Prevalence of VAWP in Kenya

In Kenya, as in several other nascent democracies, VAWP is a widespread and deeply concerning challenge that significantly hinders women's full and equal participation in the political sphere by creating a hostile environment that deters women from seeking and holding political office. This disabling environment is created by a convergence of several factors that have led to democratic backsliding and the persistence of systemic barriers to women's political empowerment, despite the existence of progressive legal frameworks, including the 2010 Constitution of Kenya (CoK) that mandates that no more than two-thirds of any gender may hold public office.²⁶ Kenya has the lowest rates of women's parliamentary representation in the East African region, at only 24.8 percent of elected seats.²⁷

The very slow growth of women's political representation in Parliament²⁸ occurs amidst broader democratic backsliding characterized by weakened opposition politics, constricting civic space, compromised electoral integrity, the occurrence of generalized violence, and institutionalized corruption.²⁹ All these governance challenges generate an environment where VAWP is rampant, undermining both gender equality and democracy more broadly. VAWP in Kenya is sustained by a complex interplay of deeply rooted societal and political factors. At the core lies the persistence of patriarchal norms, which perpetuate the idea that politics is a male domain and that women entering politics therefore goes against societal norms. As a result, women in politics face various forms of violence to keep them out of politics and reinforce their rightful place. In the

words of a Member of County Assembly (MCA) aspirant from Kakamega, 'I was labelled a prostitute simply because I dared to enter the political arena and engage with men as equals. My opponents, and even some within my own family, twisted my interactions, painting them as immoral and shameful. They accused me of corrupting the young women of our village, of setting a terrible example. The elders, both male and female, forbade anyone from associating with me. Eventually, this campaign of slander cost me my seat, despite my popularity and the work I had put into my political career... It wasn't my policies or my capabilities that failed me; it was their weaponized words and their determination to keep me as a woman in my place.'

Secondly, a persistent culture of impunity allows perpetrators to go unpunished, emboldening them and discouraging women from reporting such incidents. Women often complain about habitual abusers, well-known to the political party and even the public, who brag about their exploits yet have gone unpunished by either the political parties or law enforcement for a long time. This is compounded by a weak law enforcement regime where the police and the judiciary either are complicit or do not take seriously the claims of violence by women in politics, in spite of the existence of protective regulations. Further, the lack of effective victim support mechanisms perpetuates a cycle of violence that keeps women out of politics. One of the persistent observations from the key informant interviews was that for every woman who was in politics, they knew of at least two others who had been forced to drop out and retreat to their private spaces due to violence or the threat of it, both against themselves and family members.

At the political party level, this impunity is characterised by political gatekeepers who sexually harass female aspirants, particularly during the party nomination process as part of the ‘membership loyalty test.’ A young female key informant from Nairobi County shared how she was forced to leave her party during the party nomination process as she was constantly asked for sexual favours by senior party officials as the “price for the party nomination.” Eventually, she resigned to vie as an independent candidate (Key Informant Interview, March 2025).

3.2 Forms of VAWP

VAWP in Kenya is expressed through varied but related forms in both on and offline spaces, and each is designed to undermine women’s political participation and reinforce patriarchal power structures.

Some of the main forms of VAWP include the following;

Gendered disinformation	Psychological violence	Sexual Violence	Economic violence	Physical violence
Cyber stalking Harassment Doxxing Image-based abuse Sextortion Trolling Online mobbing Digital impersonation	Character assassination, slander, public shaming, smear campaigns Death threats, threats of rape, beatings or abduction (to self and family) Stalking Emotional manipulation	Unwanted sexual contact/advances Sexual harassment Sexual exploitation Rape/unwanted sex	Denying women access to legitimate funding Denial/delay in providing financial resources available to men Using money or other resources to control women's party members Damage to personal property Refusal to compensate women for money incurred on behalf of the party Buying off supporters/officials	Physical harassment in public, including slapping, pushing, denying access to podiums, mics. Kidnapping, Murder

3.2.1 Psychological violence

All the women interviewed reported some form of psychological violence perpetrated by a variety of actors, including the police, family members, and party officials and supporters, both from their own party and rival parties. The aim was to instil fear and deter their participation, and it was highest at the party nomination stage. Verbal abuses, smear campaigns, and intimidation were often aimed at questioning a woman's suitability for the position, all laced with sexual comments and body shaming. Comments such as 'look at how thin/fat she is,' 'your dressing style is inappropriate for a woman like you,' 'whom have you left your children/husband with?' 'How many men have you slept with to get here?' 'You are a foreigner here' and 'we are not ruled by women' were common, especially during campaigns. These hurtful comments were expressed both verbally and on social media platforms.

3.2.2 Sexual violence

This was variously expressed. Sextortion was especially rampant where party officials asked for sexual favours, more so among young unmarried women to support them in the nomination process. There was also pervasive unwanted sexual contact on the campaign trail, and when women complained, they were chided that if they wanted to stay safe, they would have stayed in their homes (Key Informant Interview, March 2025). There were also threats of rape primarily issued by supporters of rivals, within and outside their political parties.

One key informant in Nyeri shared how she was threatened by a rival in the same party with being sent hordes of bodaboda riders to 'work' on her which translated to rape. In the subsequent days, she was often stalked by unknown men right from her home, which forced her to relocate and hide for the two weeks prior to the party nominations. Reporting the threat and the stalking to the police did not help, as the police said there was no evidence (Key Informant Interview, April 2025). Sexual violence had a more salient chilling effect

and women subjected to it, especially young women in spaces that were more socially closely knit or where patriarchy was more visibly dominant like in the rural areas, or even in the urban informal settlements where the rule of law was lax tended to be discouraged from politics, or became less likely to express themselves and also censored their political speech. From the various interviews, it emerged that sexual violence and its threat, whether on or offline, was a more effective tool of keeping women from politics compared to other forms of violence.

3.2.3 Physical violence

Compared to the 2017 elections, the levels of physical violence had reduced drastically, although it was still prominent during the party nomination processes.³⁰ In February 2017, just before the general elections in August of the same year, Eunice Wambui, an aspiring MP for Embakasi South in Nairobi, was viciously attacked by young men wielding machetes and rungu while on a voter registration drive in Mukuru Kwa Reuben, one of Nairobi's sprawling slums. And in May of the same year, Esther Passaris, a Nairobi entrepreneur and politician running to be Nairobi County representative, was held hostage at the University of Nairobi by a group of male students. The students demanded 150,000 Kenyan shillings (US\$ 1,500) from her before she managed to escape.³¹

In the 2022 electoral cycle, the most prominent forms of physical violence were public harassment, including slapping, pushing, and denying access to podiums and microphones, especially during the campaign period. This was perpetuated by opponents, mainly in the same political party or their supporters. This form of violence was meted out on both new and seasoned women in politics and often went unreported, as it was passed off as 'normal' in those heated political moments.

3.2.4 Economic violence

This mainly manifested through resource denial, where women candidates reported either delayed, lesser, or a lack of monetary party support, compared to their male counterparts. Even where women succeeded in being the party candidates after nominations, some reported economic sabotage from the male colleagues whom they had defeated in the party primaries and who used their networks of influence within the party ranks. Most of the women who faced economic violence from party members were those competing for higher positions, like member of parliament, the Senate, and the Governor positions. This was because these seats required mobilization of more resources and from diverse sources, including the party and well-resourced party members, who were mostly men.

A more insidious but invisible form of economic violence was where new women aspirants were asked to use their resources and promised that the party would refund them later. Needless to say, these women, especially those unsuccessful in holding elected offices, were not only not compensated but were shunned by the party and relegated to economic hardships. One of the key informants, who was a candidate for the deputy governor position, reported that she invested approximately USD 20,000 of her personal funds to support both her own campaign and that of her running mate as part of a joint ticket within a well-established political party. She did so with the understanding that she would be reimbursed for these expenses. However, she was subsequently replaced by a male candidate and did not receive any compensation for the resources she had expended (Key Informant Interview, March 2025).

In other instances, male political rivals simply bought off the agents and supporters of women aspirants because the men either had more or better access to resources compared to the women. In the words of one MCA female aspirant from Machakos County, 'On the morning of the party nominations, I arrived at polling centers only

to discover that most of my agents had been bribed overnight and had switched off their phones. I was left with only a handful of agents, some of whom had also been compromised. This is ultimately how I lost my party's nomination contest.'

3.2.5 Gendered disinformation

In 2022, Nendo and #ShePersisted conducted a study on gender disinformation to analyse and categorise the gendered online attacks on women leaders in the run-up to the 2022 Kenyan general elections.³² The study found that gendered disinformation was a primary source of harassment and intimidation for women in Kenyan politics, which was easily spread on Facebook, TikTok and message apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram. From the research, some key findings with regards to gendered disinformation in Kenya included the following;

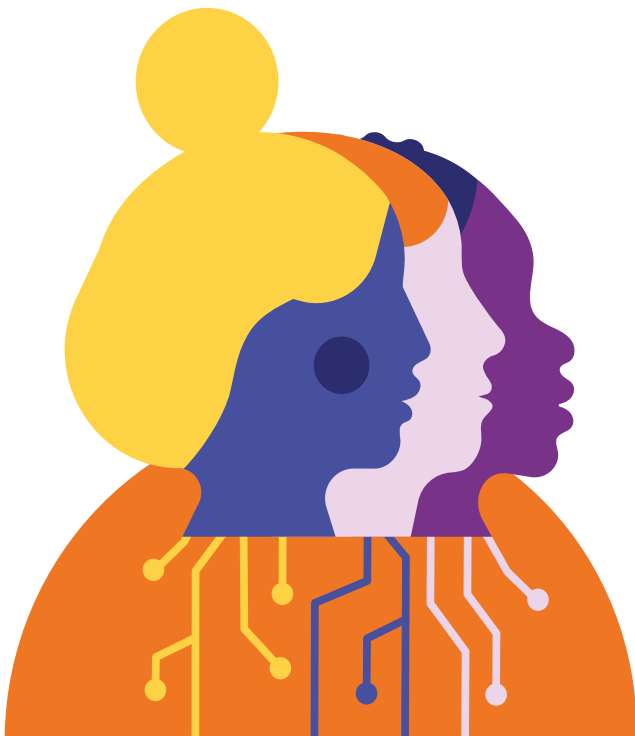
- **Female politicians faced a wide range of attacks, including over their appearance, qualifications, and stance on political matters, which was considered ignorant and/or uninformed;**
- **Women in politics experienced crude sexual attacks, which claimed they were using their bodies to gain attention. These attacks intentionally watered-down women's qualifications and oversimplified their political engagements.**
- **Women who pushed back against the attacks were often labelled as headstrong or difficult;**

These findings were echoed by the women key informants in the study who often cited that 'Matusi kwa social media ni kawaida- it's the cost of doing politics' acknowledging that verbal abuse and hate speech on social media are common experiences and even considered a normal part of political engagement for women in Kenya.



According to the female respondents, the main forms of online attacks included the following;

- **Cyberstalking and harassment:** persistent online harassment, threats, and intimidation, as well as stalking, aimed at causing fear and anxiety.
- **Doxing:** the malicious publication of private or identifying information with the intent to harm or scare women. Most of this information would be about their home, family members, their routines and contact details.
- **Image-based abuse:** including non-consensual distribution of intimate images and the manipulation of images, primarily nude images.
- **Sextortion:** coercing women into providing sexual images or favours under the threat of public exposure, more so at party nomination stage
- **Trolling and online mobbing:** coordinated online attacks aimed at silencing a woman, often involving paid “bloggers” and unsuspecting individuals.
- **Digital impersonation:** creating fake online accounts to impersonate a woman, spread disinformation, and cause reputational damage.



According to the respondents, while attacks were highest on Meta platforms, especially Facebook, they were most severe by sophistication on X. These forms of online attacks have severe consequences both to the individual and to women's political participation, leading to psychological trauma, reputational damage, physical harm, and a chilling effect that causes women to withdraw from the political space. One female aspirant, vying for the position of member of parliament in Nyeri County, shared how she was forced to hastily withdraw from the contest when a cheap fake of her in a sexual encounter was widely circulated in her constituency. She also shared that she knew of several other women who shied away from vying for fear of such content being circulated online and accessed by their children and the community at large (Key Informant Interview, March 2025).

The classifications of VAWP into various groups is largely arbitrary, as the different forms often overlap and reinforce each other, particularly in the blurred lines between online and offline spaces. Digital violence, including cyberbullying and disinformation, frequently translates into tangible, real-world consequences for women in politics in Kenya.³³ For instance, the psychological harm inflicted through online attacks can lead to social isolation and withdrawal from political activities. As one female member of parliament observed during the interview, 'Out of a hundred women who would like to go into politics, 60% or more drop off along the way, or are unable to fully achieve their full political potential due to violence, especially the one from social media (Key Informant Interview, April 2025). The mutually reinforcing relationship between online and offline violence heightens the concerns surrounding VAWP, as digital platforms increasingly serve as enablers in the perpetuation of such abuse.

3.3 Impact of VAWP in Kenya

VAWP has a damaging effect on democracy and development. In democratic systems, the full and equal participation of all citizens is essential as democratic governance is premised on the principles of equality, representation, and the rule of law.³⁴ However, VAWP compromises these tenets by creating an environment where women are systematically excluded from full participation. It also violates women's human rights and dignity and hinders their full and equal participation in political processes. When women are targeted with violence, it silences their voices, limits their political engagement, undermines their credibility and faith in themselves, and discourages them from seeking political leadership. This marginalization not only denies communities of the unique perspectives and contributions of many qualified and capable leaders but also skews political representation, resulting in policies and decisions that do not fully mirror the needs and interests of the entire population. Research shows women in politics disproportionately advocate for healthcare, education, and anti-discrimination policies compared to their male counterparts.³⁵ Furthermore, VAWP impedes the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment and Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions. Therefore, VAWP impacts the personal and professional lives of women as well as the quality of democracy.³⁶

VAWP in Kenya has far-reaching consequences for both the country's nascent democracy and women's political empowerment. It undermines democracy by excluding women from meaningful political participation, perpetuates patriarchal dominance in governance, and erodes public trust in political systems, including political parties. The following section explores some of the impacts of VAWP in the country.

To begin with, VAWP leads to women's diminished involvement in politics, resulting in their disproportionately smaller numbers in government and political decision-making bodies. Currently, women in parliament in Kenya make up only 24%.³⁷ This negatively compares to other sectors where women make up about 32% of chief executive officers and 36% in governing boards in Kenya.³⁸ This gross underrepresentation of women's voices and agency means that many critical governance decisions taken often miss women's perspectives and experiences, hindering the development of inclusive solutions to the nation's challenges. During a key informant interview, a Woman Representative in Parliament described experiencing persistent harassment from the Governor of her county, who viewed her as a threat to his re-election prospects in 2027. She explained that reporting the harassment to the party was not a viable option, as the Governor held a senior position within the party and wielded significant political influence. Consequently, she chose to remain silent and withdraw from active political engagement in order to minimize further attacks (Key Informant Interview, March 2025). VAWP not only discourages women from running for political office but also limits their political mobility and choices once in office, further reinforcing the patriarchal narrative of politics as the domain of men. Many women interviewed said that they preferred to vie for safe positions like that of a women's representative at the county level, as they did not have to compete with men, and therefore violence was less vicious as compared to the other seats that were gender neutral.

Furthermore, VAWP supports a culture of impunity where offenders, usually men, are hardly held responsible for these acts, further emboldening them and their sympathisers and entrenching a system of gender inequality in politics. This sends a signal that VAWP is acceptable, creating a climate of fear and discouraging women from reporting incidents or seeking justice. The failure to address VAWP not only harms individual victims but also undermines the rule of law and the credibility of the

justice system. When impunity is normalized, women fear reporting abuse, whether at party or law enforcement levels, and oftentimes, prefer either to self-censor or exit the political space altogether. Two female aspirants in different political parties narrated how they had been subjected to online sexual slander during party nomination processes and had vowed to keep away from politics. This was a common trend, especially among young women entering the political space for the first time and who usually had limited resources, support networks, and help in dealing with the attacks.

A related challenge with VAWP is that it erodes trust in democratic institutions and processes, especially among women, who may perceive politics as perilous and, therefore, choose to disengage and exit. This leads to a lopsided democracy that lacks full representation and legitimacy. At the community level, it reinforces harmful biases and negatively influences trust and perceptions about women in politics. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle where fewer women enter politics due to fear of violence, leading to limited role models for future generations. Furthermore, since community members do not comprehend how a (woman) leader or someone seeking political power can be so helpless or the full impact of VAWP, they then prefer to elect male leaders as they are perceived as more successful in achieving outcomes for the community. As a result, casual statements like 'a woman cannot lead me' or 'if women are so capable, how come they have never been elected president in Kenya? become commonplace in society, slowly socializing the younger generations about the place of a woman in society and reinforcing age-old gender stereotypes (Key Informant Interview, April 2025).

At a personal level, VAWP can harm the well-being of women by affecting their physical, psychological, and emotional health. It can cause bodily injuries, illnesses, or disabilities, as well as psychological trauma, stress, or depression. VAWP can also affect the social and economic status and conditions of women in politics by isolating them from their families, friends, or communities, or by depriving them of their income, assets, or opportunities.³⁹ In 2017, Millie Odhiambo's house was burned in Kisumu by rowdy youths, and her bodyguard killed for political reasons. She was vying for the area member of parliament's seat, which she subsequently won.⁴⁰ One female candidate contesting an MCA position in Nairobi recounted how she was physically assaulted and expelled from her matrimonial home by her husband following the public circulation of her fabricated sexual images. Dependent on the family business for income, she was left without financial support and forced to relocate to the village. This resulted in severe economic hardship and psychological trauma (Key Informant Interview, March 2025). This incident underscores the devastating personal and professional consequences of VAWP and how both on and offline violence in Kenya reinforce each other to the detriment of women in politics.

Online gendered violence was especially found to be damaging. Unlike the other 'traditional' forms of VAWP, which are often localized and time-bound, online violence can spread virally across the country and even internationally, almost instantaneously, reaching vast audiences with unprecedented speed and scale. Furthermore, the anonymity afforded to perpetrators online emboldens them, making identification and accountability significantly more challenging than in many offline scenarios, fostering a culture of impunity. Worse still, harmful online content possesses a devastating permanence; damaging posts, manipulated images, or false narratives can be difficult, if not impossible, to fully erase, resurfacing repeatedly to inflict enduring reputational and psychological harm long after an initial incident. This creates an inescapable siege,

as the violence follows women into their private lives via personal devices 24/7, unlike offline threats from which one might physically withdraw.

As a result, online violence imposes a pervasive, constant, and long-lasting psychological toll that effectively silences women, destroys political careers, and deters future participation in Kenyan politics in ways that traditional forms, while physically dangerous, may not achieve with such widespread, enduring, and elusive impact. Women interviewed highlighted that online abuse originating from the 2022 elections persisted and continued to cause harm, even after the elections. Their requests for takedowns were unsuccessful, leaving the offensive material online and accessible. Additionally, most female respondents observed that the widespread nature of online violence has made it much more challenging for women to enter politics today compared to the past, where the backing of key local male figures was the main prerequisite.

4.0 Challenges faced by political parties in preventing and responding to VAWP

Effectively responding to the endemic challenge of VAWP in Kenya requires commitment and action from a wide array of stakeholders, including government agencies, electoral institutions, civil society organizations, law enforcement, and the media, among others. However, within this crucial ecosystem of responsibility, political parties bear a distinct and arguably primary duty to prevent and address VAWP.⁴¹ They are the foundational organizing structures in multi-party democracies like Kenya and act as crucial conduits for citizen engagement and representation by structuring political discourse, recruiting and nominating candidates, and formulating policies that reflect diverse societal interests.⁴²

A key aspect of advancing democracy by political parties is their support of women's participation in the political process, crucially as an affirmation of women's fundamental human rights, but also strategically, in the realization of a more holistic and inclusive democracy. By dismantling patriarchal barriers and actively promoting gender equality within their ranks, parties create a more inclusive and representative political landscape. This involves acts such as implementing affirmative action measures, targeted recruitment, and protecting women from violence. All these lead to increased representation of women in leadership positions at party and political positions more broadly. By dismantling the barriers that violence creates, parties enable women to fully exercise their political rights, leading to greater accountability, legitimacy, and ultimately, a more robust and representative democracy that better reflects the needs and aspirations of all its citizens.⁴³

Political parties in Kenya, however, face several challenges in their attempt to protect women in politics from violence.⁴⁴ These challenges stem from deep-rooted patriarchal norms, a lack of enforcement of internal party codes, and a pervasive culture of impunity. Many parties prioritize political expediency over women's safety, often silencing victims and failing to hold perpetrators accountable. This inaction perpetuates a hostile environment, discouraging women's participation and undermining the democratic principles of equality and representation, ultimately weakening Kenya's democratic fabric. The challenges happen in many ways and at several levels, as discussed in the following section.

Persistence of patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes

Political parties in Kenya often mirror societal gender biases, perpetuating the view that leadership is a male domain. The male-dominated party structures reinforce exclusionary practices such as sexual coercion and make it difficult to challenge violence against women in their ranks. While all political parties have internal dispute resolution mechanisms mostly anchored in disciplinary committees of the national executive committees, women reported that these mechanisms were primarily male-dominated and did not take the issues of VAWP seriously. In a key informant interview with one of the women legislators, she narrated how she was told to "man up" or leave the political space if she was bothered by violence since that was 'how politics was done' (Key Informant Interview, March 2025). This 'advice' was given by a male leader of the party disciplinary committee.

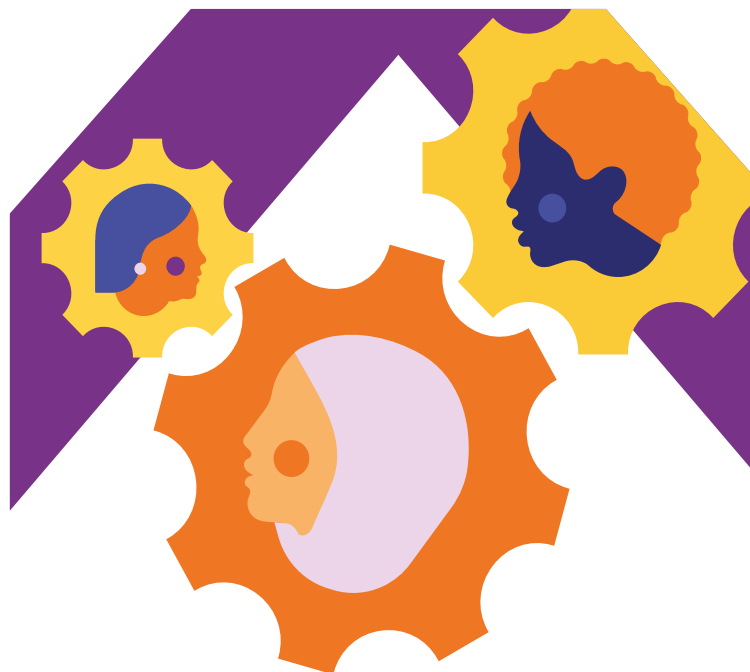
Weak Internal Mechanisms

Many political parties in Kenya lack robust internal mechanisms for reporting, investigating, and adjudicating cases of VAWP, as well as raising awareness of the same. This is partly due to the fact that many parties do not explicitly recognize VAWP as a threat that demands prioritized attention. Furthermore, Kenyan political parties are generally characterized by weak institutional structures, personalized ownership, and a lack of internal democracy and robust systems.⁴⁵ Furthermore, there is a discernible gap in understanding the fundamental role of political parties within a democratic system that exists among both party supporters and officials. This, in some situations, leads to a tendency to prioritize short-term personal gains over the broader institutional functions of political parties, such as ensuring women's political participation in a safe context. As observed by the executive director of a major party, political parties in Kenya often function as special-purpose vehicles designed primarily to capture power during elections. Once the electoral cycle concludes, regardless of whether they succeed or fail, these parties tend to become inactive and lose significance until the next election period. Consequently, they are typically not invested in long-term strategies, such as addressing VAWP, as such initiatives are not perceived to yield immediate electoral benefits

Specifically, with regard to VAWP, many parties lack clearly defined and widely disseminated reporting procedures. Women who experience violence are often left without guidance on how to file complaints, whom to contact, or what evidence is required. This often leads to the suppression of the

complaint as the woman suffers in silence. In the words of a key informant female aspirant who had faced both on and offline violence but did not report, 'First, you are not even sure where and how to report within the party and if you do, you find that the office bearers you are reporting to are either the perpetrators, are friends with perpetrators, or if its during campaigns, everybody is too busy to take your issues seriously.' (Key Informant Interview, March 2025).

Secondly, all the political parties lack trained personnel within their structures who understand VAWP and who can, therefore, professionally handle the complaints. Investigations of VAWP allegations require specialized knowledge of gender-based violence, trauma-informed approaches, and legal procedures, most of which are lacking in the committees that are mandated to handle the complaints. Without these sensitivities and specialized knowledge, cases are often mishandled, leading to revictimization and a lack of trust in the process. As one female legislator observed, 'If you report, you are marked by the rest of the party as a weakling, not ready for politics, and that has negative implications on your networks and net worth within and even outside the party.' (Key Informant Interview, April 2025).



Finally, parties lack impartial adjudication processes as the people who sit in those disciplinary committees are mostly elected members of the party. This undermines the credibility of any internal resolution of VAWP, as these mechanisms are often influenced by allegiances or personal biases, leading to unfair outcomes. Furthermore, when offences are committed by party members, especially those with power and influence, the disciplinary committee members would not wish to antagonise them for their own political survival. This lack of impartiality perpetuates a culture where women fear that reporting VAWP will lead to further harm or dismissal, effectively discouraging them from seeking redress.

Consequently, the absence of clear procedures, trained personnel, and impartial processes creates a vacuum of accountability, reinforcing a sense of impunity among perpetrators and fostering a climate of fear that silences victims. This systemic failure not only undermines women's political participation but also erodes the democratic principles of justice and equality within Kenyan political parties, as well as eroding trust in parties by women.

Underreporting due to a culture of silence and stigma

A deeply entrenched culture of silence, fuelled by victim-blaming attitudes, continues to hinder the reporting and addressing of VAWP, both at political parties' level and among law enforcement more generally. This culture is deeply rooted in societal norms and often amplified within political party structures, where power dynamics and entrenched patriarchal attitudes discourage women from speaking out. Fear of retaliation is a significant deterrent. Women often fear that reporting VAWP, especially against powerful party figures, will lead to professional ostracization, physical harm, or even the sabotage of their political careers.

The deeply ingrained societal belief that women are somehow responsible for the violence they experience—victim-blaming—creates a sense of shame and isolation. Women fear being judged or ostracized by their communities and even their own families if they come forward. The profound lack of trust in the party reporting system further compounds the problem. Women often believe that their complaints will be dismissed, ignored, or mishandled by political parties and even law

enforcement. Many have witnessed such mishandling where cases were ignored, evidence compromised, or they were even accused of political mudslinging. Further, the police have often been accused of ignoring such reports, through such flimsy grounds as “those are political issues and we don’t want to be involved in politics, we are police officers.” The lack of clear reporting mechanisms, as discussed earlier, further compounds this lack of confidence. Ultimately, this culture of silence and stigma fosters a hostile environment where perpetrators operate with impunity, knowing that their actions are unlikely to be challenged, both within party structures and even among law enforcement.

Lack of sustained political will to eradicate VAWP

There is a noticeable lack of commitment and will to address VAWP among political party leadership in Kenya. This is often evidenced by the lack of meaningful attention beyond lip service to women’s safety and security within political spaces. As such, there is a consistent failure to strengthen and enforce internal party rules, specifically those that address women’s safety. Despite having codes of conduct that ostensibly prohibit VAWP (as part of more generalized violence), many political parties demonstrate a stark reluctance to apply these rules when violations occur. During the 2017 and 2022 general elections, for instance, some women candidates reported incidents of physical assault, online harassment, and intimidation, yet very few parties initiated thorough investigations or imposed meaningful sanctions on the perpetrators.⁴⁶ A 2023 study by Pollicy investigated gendered disinformation during the 2022 elections by monitoring 268 social media accounts of both male and female individuals. The findings revealed that 43% of the women’s Twitter accounts experienced online violence, a figure that rose to 56% on their Facebook accounts.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, comprehensive and reliable statistics on VAWP at the individual political party level are not readily available. This limitation is attributable to factors including underdeveloped reporting mechanisms

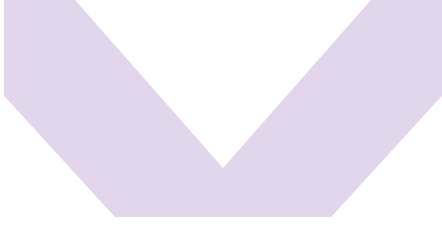
within political parties, the pervasive issue of underreporting, and the inherent political sensitivity surrounding VAWP.

The lack of enforcement of women’s protection by parties sends a clear message that women’s safety is secondary to political expediency. According to many women interviewed, cases of sexual harassment, especially made against powerful party members, are often swept under the carpet with party leadership prioritizing damage control and protecting their own rather than seeking justice.

Across party events like campaigns and meetings, and even in party offices, security protocols to protect women from various forms of violence are often lacking. Many political parties also fail to invest in gender sensitive and VAWP training for their members, as this is not seen as a priority. The lack of political will that is especially visible in established political parties and which inadvertently attracts more women aspirants leads to a perpetuation of VAWP culture within their ranks. Newer parties, which are often much smaller, including those led by women, are more deliberate in publicly castigating VAWP. However, their internal structures and policies usually exhibit similar shortcomings to those of older, more established parties in proactively prioritizing VAWP prevention and response.

Resource constraints to address VAWP

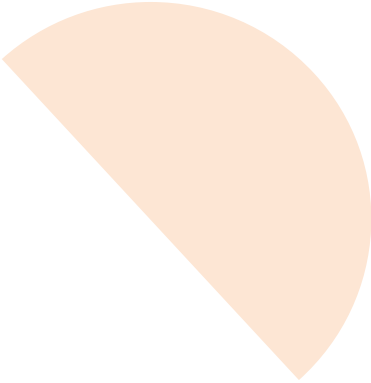
The lack of any meaningful resourcing across different political parties in Kenya to address VAWP reveals a stark lack of attention or recognition to the damage VAWP causes to women’s political empowerment and democracy more broadly. In the financial year 2023/2024, for example, 48 political parties were funded by the government of Kenya.⁴⁸ However, none of these parties had a specialised kitty or program to address VAWP. Explaining this glaring omission, one of the nominated women senators, herself a victim of VAWP, observed that the lack of dedicated resources for VAWP is not so much a question of resource constraints but rather a systemic disregard for women’s safety and overall



political participation. The same level of neglect was observed during heated political moments like campaigns, where political parties constantly failed to make any form of security measures to protect women, even if it was known that women were vulnerable to more damaging violence, both physical and online, compared to their male counterparts.⁴⁹ In such moments, women were often advised to 'dress properly' and 'kaa ngumu kama mwanaume-be strong like a man (Key Informant Interview, April 2025).'

The under-prioritization of women's safety and security within political parties is also reflected in their budgetary allocations. Election periods typically see the majority of funds directed towards campaign rallies, media advertising, and promotional events, with a conspicuous absence of resources dedicated to gender sensitivity training and VAWP prevention at the party level.⁵⁰ From the interviews with members of the 10 political parties, only members of ODM indicated that their party had undertaken gender sensitivity and VAWP training in the run-up to the 2022 elections. Members of the other nine political parties were unaware of such undertakings by their political parties.⁵¹ In a key informant interview with the executive director of one of the main parties, which received an allocation of over USD 100,000,⁵² such issues as gender sensitivity and VAWP training were expected to be taken up by civil society as they were not core to the party operations (Key informant interview, April 2025).

The lack of resources extended to critical services and support for women politicians who found themselves victims of VAWP. Women who required specialised services and support, including legal aid, safe houses, or counselling, often found themselves without meaningful support from the political party and had to navigate the trauma and other complexities on their own or with family support. Two women from different political parties well-articulated this systemic lack of women's protection by political parties during the interview as the below case studies illustrate.



→ Case Study

Dreams shattered: VAWP and the retreat of two women from politics

Case 1-A popular young grassroots mobiliser from Embu County for one of the major parties and who was vying for an MCA seat in the 2022 elections, vowed to completely leave politics after she was targeted by members of her political party with both physical and online violence in the run-up to the party nominations. Being a popular grassroots mobiliser, she was seen as a threat by male figures within her party, not just at the county level, but at the constituency level as well. What followed was a coordinated campaign of intimidation, both online and physically, against her and her family. On the day of the primaries, as she arrived at a polling station, a group of young men, openly allied with her main male opponent, physically blocked her access, shoving her and shouting obscenities and threatening her with further violence if she did not withdraw. She immediately reported the incident to her party branch officials, providing names and even video evidence captured by a supporter, but which was also publicly available. The party promised to investigate, but no action was ever taken or any feedback provided after that. The

perpetrators, influential local politicians, faced no repercussions. Disillusioned, traumatized, having lost the party primary and feeling betrayed by the party, she retreated from active politics.

Case 2-During the 2017 party primaries, a female parliamentary aspirant in Nyeri County was dragged from her car and brutally beaten by four masked men wielding metal bars and a gun. During the assault, they demanded she quit politics in favour of her male opponent and threatened to finish her and her family if she persisted. Immediately following the assault, she reported the incident to both the local police station and the party branch office. As a candidate running under the then-ruling party's ticket, she anticipated swift action. However, her case was effectively suppressed by both the police and the local party branch. Subsequent attempts to escalate the matter to the national party offices proved futile; instead, she encountered further threats aimed at discouraging her pursuit of justice. Deeply disillusioned by the party's complicity and profoundly traumatized by the violence, she resolved to permanently abandon her political ambitions.

The deliberate lack of resourcing efforts to address VAWP has significant consequences on women's political participation. It reinforces impunity and male domination of political parties and tacitly sends the message that VAWP is tolerated within political parties. The overall consequence is that more and more women opt to stay out of the political space.

5.0 Ending VAWP in Kenya

Addressing VAWP in Kenya demands a multi-faceted approach, with various stakeholders holding crucial roles. Civil society organizations play a vital role in advocacy, victim support, and raising awareness, while the media shapes public discourse and can either perpetuate or challenge harmful norms. Law enforcement and the judiciary are responsible for enforcing laws and providing justice for survivors, while other government agencies set regulations and policy. However, political parties bear the primary responsibility to prevent and address VAWP. As gatekeepers to political participation, they must create a safe and inclusive environment for female aspirants and leaders. Their actions, or inactions, significantly influence the prevalence and acceptability of VAWP within party and public spaces.

The subsequent section outlines recommendations for diverse stakeholders in Kenya aimed at eradicating VAWP, with a particular emphasis on the critical role of political parties in driving these efforts.

5.1 Recommended actions for political parties

Political parties, as the foundation of political organizing, play a critical role in enabling or disabling VAWP. Therefore, they must take various measures internally at an institutional level as well as externally in their operating environment to ensure that women are protected from VAWP by creating a safer, more inclusive political environment. Towards this, political parties in Kenya can undertake several concrete actions as discussed below.

Enforce a culture of zero tolerance against VAWP through strong internal policies; political parties must enforce through regulations and actions a culture of zero tolerance to all forms of violence both on and offline at both an institutional level as well as in their operating environment. At an internal level, this commitment should be reflected not just in the codes of conduct but also in the parties' constitutions in recognition of its gravity and to leave no doubt about its unacceptability. The party rules and regulations must also clearly stipulate the disciplinary measures for violations that must be proportionate to the violations. While most political parties have language that discourages violence, VAWP should be given a special status and clearly defined with corresponding penalties on its own. This will send a clear message on how seriously parties treat VAWP among their ranks. These rules must be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect new forms of violence directed at women. Additionally, they must be widely disseminated among party members and supporters so that members cannot claim ignorance as they perpetuate VAWP.

Some elements of such internal mechanisms responding to VAWP would include the following;

Definition and Scope of VAWP:

- **Clear Definition:** The policy would explicitly define what constitutes VAWP, from physical to psychological, economic, sexual, and online forms of violence as well as harassment, intimidation, and discrimination specifically targeting women in political roles.
- **Broad Scope:** The policy would apply to all members of the party – elected officials, party leaders, staff, volunteers, and even supporters acting in the party’s name. It would cover actions occurring within party structures, at political events, online, and in public spaces related to their political roles.

Prevention Mechanisms: The policy would further outline the following;

- **Code of Conduct:** A clear and comprehensive code of conduct outlining expected behavior and explicitly prohibiting VAWP in all its forms.
- **Awareness and Training Programs:** Mandatory and regular training for all party members on VAWP, gender sensitivity, and modes of strategic and compliant communication on VAWP.

- **Promoting Gender Equality:** Explicit commitments and actions to promote gender equality within the party structures, ensuring women have equal opportunities for leadership and participation as a direct challenge to patriarchal norms.
- **Inclusive Party Culture:** Initiatives to foster an inclusive and respectful party culture where women feel safe, valued, and supported. This could include mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and creating spaces for women to voice their concerns.
- **Campaign Guidelines:** Specific guidelines for political campaigns that prohibit the use of sexist, misogynistic, or violent rhetoric and imagery against women candidates or politicians.

Reporting Mechanisms:

- **Clear and Accessible Reporting Channels:** Establishing multiple, confidential, and easily accessible channels for reporting incidents of VAWP. These could include designated internal officers, online platforms, hotlines, and external cross-party platforms like a situation room hosted by KEWOPA.
- **Protection for Reporters:** Guarantees of confidentiality and protection against retaliation for individuals who report incidents of VAWP, as well as for witnesses.
- **Support for Survivors:** Clear protocols for supporting survivors of VAWP, including access to counseling, legal aid, and other necessary resources. The party could partner with external organizations, like FIDA, CREAM etc to provide these services or offer a clear referral mechanism for accessing these services.

Investigation and Adjudication Processes:

- **Fair and Impartial Investigations:** Establishing clear, transparent, and impartial procedures for investigating allegations of VAWP. This might involve trained internal committees or external independent investigators.
- **Timely Resolution:** Committing to timely and efficient resolution of reported cases.
- **Range of Sanctions:** Defining a clear range of sanctions for individuals found responsible for VAWP, commensurate with the severity of the offense. These could include warnings, mandatory training, suspension of party membership, removal from leadership positions, and expulsion from the party.
- **Transparency (within limits):** Communicating the outcomes of investigations and disciplinary processes in a way that respects the privacy of all parties involved while maintaining accountability.

Collaboration and External Engagement: commitment to undertake the following

- **Partnerships with Civil Society:** Collaborating with women's rights organizations, other CSOs, and experts working on VAWP to inform policy development and implementation continually.
- **Advocacy for Legal Reforms:** Actively advocating for stronger laws and policies at the national level to prevent and address VAWP.
- **Inter-Party Cooperation:** continually working with other political parties to establish common standards and mechanisms for addressing VAWP across the political landscape.
- **International Best Practices:** to continually incorporate international best practices and guidelines on addressing violence against women in political and public life.

Political parties must also build and strengthen their internal mechanisms for monitoring VAWP. Systematic data collection on the various forms of violence experienced by women within political spaces enables parties to identify patterns, assess risks, and develop targeted strategies to mitigate harm. Such data not only strengthens internal party systems but also informs broader legal and policy reforms to prevent VAWP.⁵³ In deploying monitoring and response mechanisms, political parties in Kenya can borrow from the cross-party Women's Situation Room (WSR) concept that is usually deployed during elections in the country to respond to electoral gender-based violence.

→ Case Study

Women's Situation Room in Kenya

The Women's Situation Room (WSR) has emerged as a pivotal electoral conflict prevention and peace-building mechanism in Kenyan elections, demonstrably empowering women as key actors in safeguarding the integrity and security of the electoral process, particularly for women voters, aspirants, and officials. Successfully deployed in the 2013, 2017, and 2022 Kenyan elections, the WSR functions as a real-time monitoring and rapid response system to electoral violence. This inclusive framework convenes women alongside diverse stakeholders to proactively mitigate potential conflicts, address incidents of electoral violence, and foster an environment conducive to peaceful coexistence. Through strategic interventions such as the deployment of trained observers, the operation of incident reporting call centers, and proactive engagement with political and community leaders, the WSR endeavors to establish a secure electoral climate where women's perspectives are amplified and their specific concerns are effectively addressed.



Since the persistence of VAWP goes hand in hand with broader challenges of women's marginalization from political power, its prevention must necessarily be accompanied by the enactment and enforcement of policies towards gender equality in political participation, including meaningful representation within the party's governing bodies.⁵⁴ In Kenya, the constitutional provision of the 'no more than two-thirds gender rule' is expected to govern all public bodies, including political parties. According to many women interviewed, this rule is either ignored within political party governing bodies or applied tokenistically, where women get less powerful positions compared to men. The commitment to ending VAWP and achieving gender equality within political parties demands that women are meaningfully represented within the party's governing ranks.

Internal disciplinary mechanisms must be supported by strong reporting and investigating protocols that are accessible, confidential, and staffed with gender sensitive officers. Most current reporting mechanisms, where they exist, are staffed with party operatives who may be perpetrators, complicit, not gender sensitive, or not trusted by women. This discourages reporting of VAWP. To move away from this state, the reporting mechanisms must be professionalised and resourced to allow for proper investigation, including data handling. This will also allow for non-impunity, where even the highest-ranking party members and those most influential are sanctioned when they violate the law.

The Green Party of Finland stands out as a concrete example of a political party that has implemented a strong internal mechanism for reporting and responding to VAWP, as illustrated by the figure below.

PREVENTION

- **Contract for candidates**
- **Safety and security training**
- **Online safety training**
- **Safe**

PROTECTION

- **Online support service for candidates experiencing online violence**
- **Safe: Green**
- **Women Guidebook against Online Violence**
- **Safety training for Green women candidates**
- **Referral to external support**

REPORTING

- **Reporting points in the party**
- **Reporting liaison in the police**
- **Guidance for reporting online**

PARTNERSHIP

- **Cross-party advocacy**
- **Campaigns during election periods**
- **Joint pledges, statements, calls to action**

Source: OSCE Region Toolkit.⁵⁵

Similarly, Bolivia stands as a global pioneer in addressing VAWP, with both ground-breaking national legislation and internal party mechanisms, particularly within the Movement for Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS), the country's dominant political party.

→ Case Study

Bolivia's Movement for Socialism (MAS) Internal Mechanisms to Address VAWP

In 2012, Bolivia enacted Law No. 243 Against Harassment and Political Violence Against Women, the world's first law specifically targeting VAWP.⁵⁶ This law defines 17 forms of political harassment and violence, establishes penalties, and creates follow-up mechanisms for implementation, including a National Gender Observatory where incidents can be reported. While Law 243 applies nationally, MAS has integrated its principles into party operations and internal rules, making it a leading example in Latin America and generally globally of a political party with mechanisms addressing VAWP.

Code of Conduct and Internal Regulations; MAS's internal statutes and codes of conduct explicitly prohibit all forms of political harassment and violence against women, in line with Law 243. This includes physical, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as threats, pressure, and actions intended to impede women's political participation.

Reporting and Accountability Structures: The party has established internal procedures for reporting acts of harassment or violence. Women can file complaints within the party structure or through the National Gender Observatory. The

Association of Local Councilwomen of Bolivia (ACOBOL), closely linked with MAS, developed a statistical information system to track and document cases, providing evidence for legal action at both the party level and for the country's legal system.

Sanctions and Disciplinary Measures; MAS enforces disciplinary actions against members found guilty of VAWP, including suspension, expulsion, or referral to legal authorities for prosecution under Law 243. Sanctions are applied whether the violence occurs within the party or in a public office.

Support for Victims and Survivors; MAS, often in partnership with women's organizations like ACOBOL, provides support services for victims, including legal assistance, psychological support, and advocacy to ensure cases are properly addressed.

Impact and Challenges: Integrating Law 243 into party rules, combined with active monitoring by ACOBOL, has led to a significant increase in the reporting and documentation of VAWP cases, particularly in rural and indigenous areas.⁵⁷ Despite these mechanisms, challenges remain, such as persistent cultural resistance, internal accountability, and consistent application of rules.

Challenge prevailing patriarchal cultures and normalize women's political participation; robust internal party mechanisms should be accompanied by regular sensitization campaigns on gender equality, challenging toxic masculinities and VAWP among party officials, supporters, and the public at large. These sensitizations and trainings should be mandatory, especially among the top leadership, as they usually set the political culture within the party. Externally, male party leaders should be deliberate in publicly endorsing and promoting female candidates and supporting party communication to ensure respectful representation of female candidates in the media. These measures would also help in establishing male allies within the party who understand the consequences of VAWP and actively engage in its prevention.

As earlier discussed, part of challenging patriarchy within the party ranks should involve appointing women to senior and consequential party positions, like the Secretary General position, that can directly influence party policies. Currently, most women are either deputies in these positions or heads of women's leagues that hardly have any power.⁵⁸ In an interview with one nominated senator who was previously the Secretary General (SG) of a major party, she shared how she was removed from the position for being seen to push a pro-women agenda and instead given a tokenistic nominated senator position that had little influence at the party level. She also revealed that while there

were women chairpersons in two major political parties, these women hardly had any power, as real power was vested in the party founders/owners, or the SGs, who were mainly men (Key Informant Interview, April 2025).

Political parties must further ensure that women have equal access to party resources and opportunities, including campaign funding, training opportunities, media visibility, mentorship networks, and institutional support in order to genuinely mainstream their leadership within the party structures.

Provide comprehensive emergency support for survivors

Even as political parties work towards long-term strengthening of systems to prevent and respond to VAWP, they must put in place emergency measures to support victims of VAWP. These include establishing gender desks to provide initial assistance and information for survivors. The desks must also be complemented by related support, including safe houses, legal aid to help secure justice, and counselling and other psychosocial support services and resources. This support must be available to women who have experienced violence, regardless of electoral outcomes. Oftentimes, parties tend to forget women who may have contested and lost, and these are left to wallow in many difficulties, especially trauma for those who may have experienced VAWP.

Collaboration with other stakeholders to strengthen accountability

Political parties must closely work with both state and non-state actors to strengthen preventive and response mechanisms to VAWP and ensure that political spaces are jointly owned and regulated. Forging close networks with law enforcement agencies, including the police and judiciary, will ensure that VAWP cases are treated with the seriousness they deserve. Political parties can help identify gaps with regard to regulation, awareness, and enforcement among these agencies that can be plugged. During elections, close collaboration with electoral institutions like the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Office of the Registrar of Political Parties (ORPP), and Political Parties Disputes Tribunal (PPDT) would ensure that electoral laws are fully enforced and violators penalised, regardless of their political affiliations. Such existing platforms and which political parties can readily plug into include the Election Security Arrangement Project (ESAP);⁵⁹ Mkenya Daima Initiative;⁶⁰ and the ad hoc digital election safeguarding platforms that were especially evident in the 2017 and 2022 elections and that are expected to increasingly become mainstream as digital threats to elections and democracy become more acute, as is likely to happen as the digital evolution unfolds.

Political parties should also continually work with civil society actors to advance prevention strategies, survivor support services, continuous evidence generation through research, regulations' enforcement, and advocacy for safer environments for women's political participation. Organizations like FIDA Kenya, Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), CRAWN Trust, and the Council for Responsible Social Media, who are already working in these spaces, are strong natural allies for the parties. An example of such a collaboration between civil society and political parties is the work of the Nigerian Women's Trust Fund (NWTF) in Nigeria.

→ Case Study

The Nigerian Women's Trust Fund's cross-party support for women's empowerment

The Nigerian Women's Trust Fund (NWTF) works closely with political parties in Nigeria to advance women's political participation and ensure their safety within the political arena.⁶¹ Established in 2011 as a multi-stakeholder initiative, NWTF partners with government agencies, civil society, and international organizations to address the persistent gender imbalance in elective and appointive positions. NWTF's approach includes direct engagement with political parties to advocate for gender-inclusive policies, such as the implementation of the National Gender Policy's 35% affirmative action benchmark for women's representation.⁶² The Fund conducts advocacy visits, policy dialogues, and capacity-building workshops with party leaders and stakeholders to raise awareness of legal mandates and the importance of women's leadership.

NWTF also provides technical and financial support to aspiring female politicians across party lines, helping to overcome barriers like lack of campaign funding, limited support networks, and exposure to violence or harassment. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, leadership training, and the "She Should Contest" campaign are designed to build confidence, skills, and resilience among women candidates.⁶³ Additionally, NWTF works to change discriminatory social norms within parties and the broader political environment by fostering dialogue and supporting research on women's political participation and safety. Through these multi-pronged strategies, NWTF has become a key driver of institutional change, supporting women to step into leadership roles and advocating for safer, more inclusive party structures in Nigeria.

Addressing gendered disinformation: As one of the biggest forms of violence affecting women in political spaces, and rapidly evolving, political parties must work with other stakeholders through a multi-layered approach to address online violence. This entails investing in fit-for-purpose research to understand how it's manifesting and evolving, equipping women with training and resources to enhance their digital resilience and skills, and tracking the adverse effects of other emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) on VAWP and women's political participation more broadly. When addressing these digital harms and gendered disinformation, attention should be paid to both the medium and the message. Malign narratives should not be viewed in isolation from the digital pathways that aid distribution, audience building, amplification, cross-platform coordination, inauthenticity, and deception. Furthermore, political parties, alongside women targeted, must actively call out the gendered disinformation, including both the malicious actors and the medium, which is primarily social media. For women in politics, calling out sexism often pays off in terms of bolstering the strength of a candidate and reframing the narrative. In the words of the First Lady of Namibia, Madame Monica Geingos, remaining silent about online violence and bullying, as many women tend to do, can inadvertently normalize and legitimize disinformation. It is crucial, therefore, for women and political parties to devise pushback mechanisms that connect with the wider public and electorate. The following case study highlights her encounter with online abuse, reflecting the reality for numerous women in the political space.

→ Case Study

Speaking out about online abuse and standing up for women online.

In 2021, Monica Geingos, the 3rd First Lady of Namibia, shared her personal experience with a targeted social media harassment campaign. In a video message⁶⁴ released on International Women's Day under the International Women's Day #ChooseToChallenge campaign, the First Lady powerfully stated:

"When there was a clear social media campaign of anonymous WhatsApp messages specifically targeting me in the most disgusting ways, I was told not to respond but to ignore it — and I did. But it was a mistake. Your silence will not protect you. The insults just got worse, and the lies became a lot bigger."



Beyond political parties' support for women survivors of gendered disinformation to seek legal redress using existing legal frameworks, they must work with other actors, like parliament and civil society, to update regulations to respond to the emerging technologies and their potential for abuse. Furthermore, political parties must invest in short- and long-term responses to these emerging threats. Therefore, while measures like content takedowns and fact-checking may be undertaken in the short term, political parties must appreciate that only long-term measures, including accountability by tech platforms and requisite policies and regulations, can comprehensively address VAWP. Consequently, parties must invest in both short and long-term measures to secure women's political participation from the threat of online violence.

Political actors have used various mechanisms to promote tech accountability. Here are examples that could be adapted and applied in the Kenyan context to address gendered disinformation and online violence more broadly.

Building Alliances with Civil Society and International Organizations; Following the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron brought together Heads of State and Government and leaders from the technology sector to adopt the Christchurch Call.⁶⁵ This initiative, supported by various political parties, aimed to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online. It led to commitments from tech companies to improve content moderation and transparency. Five years after the launch, it transformed into the Christchurch Call Foundation⁶⁶, expanding to a global community comprising 56 governments, 19 online service providers, 12 partner organizations, and more than 50 civil society organizations whose principal aim is to eliminate terrorism and violent extremist content online.

Advocating for Stronger Regulation

Political parties can push for new laws or reforms that force tech companies to be transparent about how they moderate content, disclose how their algorithms work (especially around political ads and disinformation), enforce stricter data protection and privacy rules, and respond faster to reports of online harassment and violence, among others. Some examples of where such action has been undertaken include the following;

- **The UK government introduced the Online Harms White Paper⁶⁷ in 2019, proposing a regulatory framework to address online harms. This initiative received cross-party support and culminated in the Online Safety Act 2023⁶⁸, which imposes duties on online platforms to protect users from harmful content, including online abuse.**
- **The European Union enacted the Digital Services Act⁶⁹ to create a safer digital space. The DSA holds online platforms accountable for the dissemination of illegal content and disinformation. It includes provisions for transparency in content moderation and has been supported by various political parties across EU member states.**
- **Kenyan Parliamentarians debated a petition by Nairobi Woman Representative, Esther Passaris, calling for amendments to the Penal Code to criminalize sextortion explicitly.⁷⁰ As of April 2025, the proposed Penal Code (Amendment) Bill, 2024, remains under parliamentary consideration. The bill seeks to formally define sextortion as a criminal offense, targeting the abuse of power where individuals demand sexual favours in exchange for services or opportunities. The initiative has received strong support from several Members of Parliament and civil society organizations, underlining the urgent need to address this form of online exploitation.**

Using Parliamentary Committees and Inquiries

Political parties can use their influence to set up parliamentary inquiries into tech company practices, summoning tech executives for questioning under oath, such as India's Parliamentary Panel which summoned representatives from major tech companies to examine their competitive behaviour in 2022.⁷¹

- Similarly, the UK's Disinformation and Fake News Inquiry (2018), a bipartisan initiative and spearheaded by the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, marked a pivotal moment in holding big tech accountable for the proliferation of online disinformation. Through its final report, the Committee sharply criticized major technology platforms, especially Facebook, for failing in their duty of care to users and for knowingly violating data privacy and anti-competition laws. The inquiry called for a compulsory Code of Ethics for tech companies, to be enforced by an independent regulator with statutory powers to launch legal action and impose hefty fines for non-compliance. MPs emphasized that social media companies could no longer claim to be neutral platforms without responsibility for the content they host, and urged Parliament to establish clear legal liabilities and robust regulation to protect democracy from targeted disinformation and harmful online content.⁷²

- The UK's Inquiry into Algorithms and Misinformation (2024). The inquiry, led by the cross-party Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, exemplifies a robust approach to tech accountability through collaborative political oversight. In response to the real-world harms witnessed during the summer 2024 riots, fueled by algorithmically amplified false claims, the inquiry brings together MPs from across the political spectrum to scrutinize how social media algorithms and generative AI contribute to spreading harmful content. The Committee has summoned major tech companies, including Google, Meta, TikTok, and X, to provide evidence and answer for their platforms' roles in amplifying disinformation. This inquiry not only reviews the effectiveness of the UK's existing regulatory framework, such as the Online Safety Act, but also seeks further measures to ensure platform transparency and accountability.⁷³ By fostering cross-party collaboration and engaging directly with technology leaders, the inquiry underscores the potential for parliaments and political parties to unite to hold big tech accountable for safeguarding public discourse and democratic stability.



5.2 Recommended actions for women in politics

Women in politics in Kenya can, at both individual and collective levels, advocate and demand a more secure political environment. They can do this through a multi-pronged strategy that includes, first, enhancing their own physical and digital resilience and security through training, mentorship, and building robust support systems against attacks. This must also entail enhancing women's capacity for strategic communications and organizing to enable them to counter harmful narratives, amplify their voices, shape public discourse, and reclaim the narratives in digital and political spaces.

Secondly, under cross-party platforms like the Kenya Women Parliamentary Association (KEWOPA), women must come together across party lines to share strategies, provide mutual support, and mentor young and upcoming women leaders. As part of this support, women should develop a robust monitoring mechanism of VAWP that also includes rapid response by way of a cross-party situation room, linked to political parties and law enforcement. This rapid response infrastructure should be able to offer immediate assistance to women facing online harassment, political retaliation, and digital violence, among other VAWP response needs. Further, women leaders and supporters must continuously demand accountability from their political parties about anti-VAWP policies and practices, including fully implementing the two-thirds gender rule and specific laws against gendered disinformation. Women in politics should also raise awareness at both the party and public levels about the prevalence and negative consequences of VAWP, borrowing from personal testimonies and experiences, including ideas on how VAWP can be mitigated.

5.3 Recommended actions for government agencies

The government, through the various institutions responsible for women's protection, should prioritize the full implementation of different laws that prohibit violence. Existing legislation, especially around online violence, needs to be strengthened to reflect the evolving realities of the digital space. Institutions like the National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC), the Judiciary (including specialized SGBV courts), the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP), the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI), and the National Police Service (NPS) need strengthening through capacity enhancement to handle VAWP effectively. Further, adequate resources, including trained personnel, must be available to deal with VAWP. The same support should be extended to electoral institutions, including the IEBC, ORPP, and PPDT, to ensure they can respond effectively to VAWP cases during elections.

The government must also ensure that comprehensive, accessible, and survivor-centered support systems are enhanced throughout the country to support the survivors of VAWP. These should include medical care, psychosocial support, legal aid, and safe shelters. Strengthening referral pathways between security agencies, health facilities, legal aid providers, and shelters is crucial for seamless service delivery.

The government should invest in prevention and awareness raising of VAWP, including challenging patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes among the public and leadership at both national and local levels. Actions should include implementing existing laws against GBV and women's political empowerment, including the two-thirds gender rule, rolling out public awareness campaigns, and gathering robust data and research on VAWP trends to inform evidence-based responses. These efforts should be part of multi-sectoral efforts



involving national and county governments, Parliament, independent commissions, political parties, civil society organizations, media, and development partners to ensure a coordinated and effective response to VAWP.

5.4 Recommended actions for civil society organizations

Civil society organizations working together and with other state and non-state actors should support holistic approaches to respond to VAWP that include the following;

Undertaking awareness-raising campaigns that target diverse audiences, including communities, men and boys, traditional and religious leaders, and youth on gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. This should also be accompanied by training that aims to enhance various stakeholders' capacity, including political leaders, women in politics, political parties, media practitioners, community leaders, and even state actors, to recognize, prevent, and respond to VAWP, including the constantly evolving online violence. CSOs should be creative in how they engage with communities to avoid blowback from patriarchy. The following excerpt illustrates an effective campaign against VAWP during the 2017 elections that sought to align the campaign within the broader national aspirations of Kenyans, thereby amplifying the central message and fostering wider support.

→ Case Study

Behaviour Change Campaigns for Women's Political Participation

In the lead up to Kenya's 2017 general election, with support from USAID, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) launched the #BetterThanThis Campaign,⁷⁴ an emotive and dynamic digital campaign that sought to address the sexist barriers faced by women in Kenyan politics. Instead of simply focusing on the abusive messages, however, the campaign engaged viewers with an aspirational message at its core, appealing to Kenya's sense of national pride and desire to be "better" than the sexism shown to its

women leaders. In a video called "Ugly Words" that went viral and garnered substantive engagement online, the campaign centred on exposing violent rhetoric documented toward women in politics as evidence of the sexism and misogyny that undermine women's leadership and electoral outcomes. Through a dynamic social media strategy, the campaign showcased what Kenya was missing without adequate political participation of women, vis-à-vis women's leadership across the other socio-economic sectors of the country.

Source: IFES, 2017.



CSOs must also be at the forefront of advocating for the development and robust implementation of laws and policies addressing VAWP among various institutions, including political parties. They should also monitor and document trends in VAWP as evidence to identify emerging gaps that need attention. Additionally, monitoring helps in holding duty bearers accountable using data and evidence. This monitoring and demanding of accountability must be extended to government agencies and tech platforms, including social media.

CSOs should also provide direct support to survivors of VAWP, including legal aid, psychosocial support, and counselling, facilitating access to medical care, and establishing or strengthening referral networks to ensure survivors can access comprehensive services seamlessly. This is especially critical in rural areas and among marginalised groups where such care is not readily available.

As VAWP poses both regional and global threats, civil society in Kenya should lead coordinated efforts through dialogue and concrete action to share best practices and collaborate in addressing VAWP, particularly in the digital space. Kenya, in particular as a trailblazer in tech accountability lawsuits, can assume a leadership role by initiating a regional, cross-sectoral task force or forum focused on combating gendered disinformation. This body should not only facilitate dialogue but also be action-oriented and rooted in harm reduction strategies, ensuring a proactive and collaborative approach to mitigating the impacts of VAWP across the East African region.

5.5 Recommended actions for media organizations

Media organizations, including digital media, must strive to report incidents of VAWP in an ethical, accurate, and gender-sensitive way, avoiding further harming the victims or being complicit by amplifying the patriarchal narratives and norms surrounding VAWP. To achieve this, they should invest in regular training for journalists, editors, and digital content creators on gender-sensitive reporting and understanding the dynamics of on- and offline VAWP. The media practitioners must also be well-versed in various codes of conduct, including the Media Council's Code of Conduct and specific guidelines on GBV reporting. Media practitioners should work closely with other actors, like civil society and government agencies, to create an environment that actively discourages VAWP and supports women's safe and equal political participation. Furthermore, media actors should strive to provide equitable and fair coverage to women in politics.

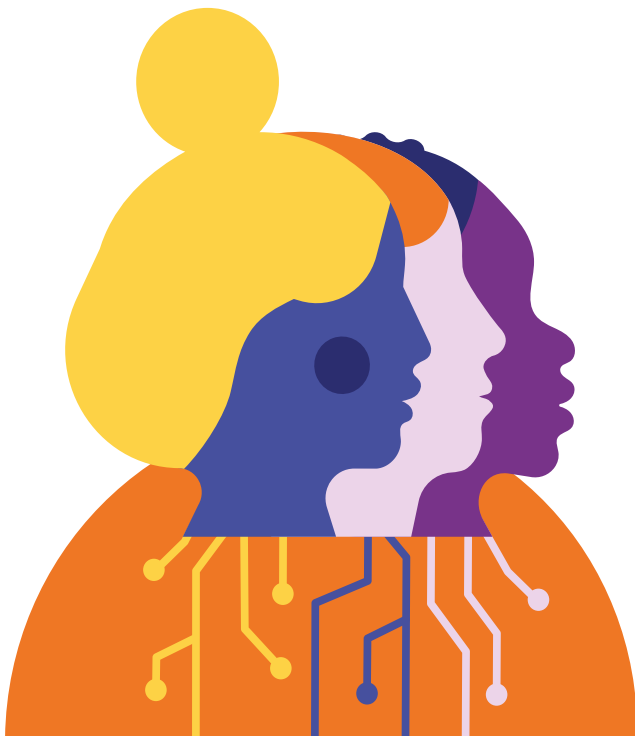
5.6 Recommended actions for Social media platforms

As the platforms where online VAWP takes place, popular social media platforms operating in Kenya, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, and closed platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, should take necessary internal and external measures to mitigate gendered disinformation on their sites.

Internally, they should invest in robust content moderation systems that combine AI with human oversight trained in local languages and socio-political nuances to swiftly identify and remove harmful content like hate speech, gendered disinformation, and harassment targeting women politicians. Platforms must enhance transparency regarding their policies, algorithms, and enforcement actions and respond to calls for greater accountability, including establishing a physical presence in Kenya as directed by the government.⁷⁵

Externally, platforms must enhance collaboration with other stakeholders, including civil society, academia, government agencies, fact-checkers, and traditional media, to better understand local contexts, refine tools, and ensure contextual relevance in handling gendered disinformation. Furthermore, platforms should empower users, particularly women in politics, with adequate safety controls and support digital literacy initiatives while also addressing how their algorithms and business models amplify harmful content, prioritizing a safe environment over engagement.

The following case study on a public opinion conducted on online harms by TIFA Research and the Council for Responsible Social Media in 2022 further illustrates the demand for a multi-stakeholder approach and reform pathway to social media platforms' safety by Kenyans.



→ Case Study

Public Opinion to Shape Tech Accountability in Kenya⁷⁶

Creating a demand-driven movement to advocate for more responsible digital platforms—and to help inoculate Kenyans against harmful gendered disinformation and TFGBV.

In 2022, TIFA Research and the Council for Responsible Social Media conducted the first-ever in-depth public opinion research in Kenya focused on disinformation, digital platform harms, and tested messaging strategies to shape public discourse on these issues. The findings offer unique insights that have immediate practical value for strengthening resilience against online attacks and disinformation.

Key learnings from this research include:

- **Evolving Public Sentiment on Platform Accountability:** There was a notable shift in Kenyans' attitudes towards social media platforms. Initially, many users felt responsible for managing online harm. However, increased awareness of the extent and impact of this harm led to a stronger demand for platforms to be held accountable for ensuring user safety.
- **Recognition of Platform Harms:** Kenyans identified various harms stemming from digital platforms, including threats to children, online scams, graphic content, negative impacts on mental health, and gender-based abuse, with women particularly affected by disinformation and attacks targeting their identity.
- **Demand for Multi-Stakeholder Action:** Kenyans expressed a desire for a balanced approach to platform regulation, involving a combination of:
 - Government intervention through regulation and legislation
 - Enhanced platforms' transparency and accountability in policy formulation, content moderation, algorithms, and enforcement actions in Kenya.
 - Empowerment of users through context-relevant educational campaigns to identify and report harmful content.
- **Emphasis on Platform Responsibility:** There's a strong call for platforms to take a more active role in protecting users by:
 - Implementing and enforcing clear rules on permissible content.
 - Improving content review processes, including proactive measures before content goes live.
 - Acting against accounts that engage in harmful behavior, such as spreading false information or posting abusive content.
- **Need for Reform Pathways:** These findings highlight the need for a robust multi-stakeholder dialogue on reform strategies, focusing on mechanisms to drive change within platforms, such as risk audits and increased transparency, to ensure greater accountability and user safety.

6.0 Conclusion

The prevalence of VAWP in Kenya, including gendered disinformation, continues to be a big challenge, not just to women's human rights, but to their political participation and democratic consolidation more broadly. The convergence of weak democratic structures, including political parties, persistent patriarchal norms, and a culture of impunity, has created a deeply concerning situation where women's political participation is severely hindered. The various forms of VAWP, ranging from gendered disinformation to physical and economic violence, not only deter women from entering and thriving in the political arena but also undermine the inclusivity and representativeness of democratic processes.

Addressing this complex challenge requires a concerted and multi-faceted approach involving all stakeholders. However, as the research has shown, political parties, as gatekeepers to political power, bear a primary responsibility to ensure a safe and secure political environment for women's participation. This should include, inter alia, adoption and enforcement of zero-tolerance policies towards VAWP, the establishment of robust and trusted internal reporting and accountability mechanisms, and proactive measures to challenge patriarchal cultures and promote women's leadership. It is crucial to reframe gendered attacks not merely as gender-based violence, but as a fundamental threat to democratic freedoms and processes. These attacks erode the very foundation of democratic participation, silencing women's voices and limiting their ability to exercise their political rights.

To effectively counter VAWP, it is essential to move beyond generic solutions and provide targeted support to women leaders while upholding their agency. This means offering resources and assistance that address the specific challenges they face, such as digital security training to combat online harassment and legal aid to seek redress for violence, while simultaneously empowering them to lead and make decisions. Ultimately, the fight against VAWP is necessarily a fight for women's empowerment. As long as women face violence and threats in the political sphere, they cannot fully and equally exercise their rights to participate in and shape Kenya's democratic future. VAWP and increasingly, its online manifestation by way of gendered disinformation, erects significant barriers to women's empowerment, perpetuating exclusion, weakening democratic institutions, and hindering the progress towards a more just and equitable society for all.



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Notes

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