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'Too aggressive' or 'slay queens': gendered attacks, threats and disinformation in Kenyan elections

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ABSTRACT

Disinformation has become a key feature of electoral campaigns globally, shaping political narratives and influencing voter perceptions – an emerging trend which is also evident in African elections. In Kenya, gendered disinformation was identified as a prominent theme in the attacks and threats levelled against women in politics during the 2017 and 2022 elections. These attacks, ranging from online trolling to explicit threats of gender-based violence, including genital mutilation, represent a significant barrier to women's political participation. While previous studies have examined the broader context of political violence surrounding Kenyan elections, limited research has focused specifically on the attacks and threats faced by women politicians, especially in the digital space. To address this gap, this exploratory study draws on semi-structured interviews with eleven individuals working in areas related to gendered attacks, threats and disinformation in Kenya, including journalism, digital rights, academia and civic society organisations that focus on women's empowerment. These are complemented by an analysis of secondary news media content to illustrate some of the examples mentioned by the interviewees. Our findings reveal the complex intersection of disinformation, gendered political violence and digital harassment faced by Kenyan women politicians.

KEYWORDS

Gendered attack; electoral disinformation; Kenya; gendered threats; political violence

The study of electoral disinformation has gained prominence following the rise of data-driven political campaigns in the United States (Baldwin-Philippi, 2024) and the United Kingdom (Anstead, 2017; Pentzold & Fölsche, 2020). Similarly, digital disinformation has played an increasingly significant role in African elections. For example, during the 2024 South African general election, the uMkhonto weSizwe Party disseminated xenophobic disinformation online (Madrid-Morales et al., 2025). In Zimbabwe, rumours circulated on Facebook which falsely claimed that the Citizens Coalition for Change was boycotting the 2023 election, leading to widespread voter abstention (Sivalo, 2024). In Kenya, coordinated disinformation and harassment campaigns have targeted journalists and civil society members on X (Mozilla, 2021), as well as several female politicians (Agunwa, 2024).

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Affirmative action is enshrined in Article 27(8) of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution, which mandates that no elective or appointive body shall have more than two-thirds of its members from the same gender (The Carter Center, 2018). While these constitutionally mandated gender quotas have led to an increase in women's political representation in Kenya, they have not eradicated the intimidation, harassment and violence that women continue to face (Berry et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, Kenyan women have made significant strides in politics and leadership. In 2021, Martha Koome became the first woman to hold the position of Chief Justice (Njeru, 2021), and in the 2022 election, Martha Karua was named Kenya's first female presidential running mate by Raila Odinga (Owino, 2022). Nevertheless, many women continue to leave senior positions due to what has been described as 'a torrent of pervasive and personalised media coverage' that reinforces societal norms positioning public leadership as a predominantly male domain (Siringi & Nduva, 2018, p. 27). While increasing women's political representation is essential, it may also trigger violent backlash, as entrenched patriarchal resistance often lags behind legislative reforms, thereby fuelling hostility towards women's empowerment initiatives (Matfess et al., 2023, p. 506).

Misogynistic discourse is increasingly prevalent in the expanding Kenyan manosphere, which has been defined as 'a loosely connected network of websites and social media platforms that promote misogyny online' (Kimeu, 2023). This includes the portrayal of female political candidates through patriarchal frames (Kishwar et al., 2024), reinforcing what Kenyan author and academic Grace Musila refers to as a 'phallocracy' – a system of male dominance in Kenyan politics (Nyabola, 2018, p. 266). Ethnic tensions that erupted during the 2007–2008 disputed presidential election left at least 1,133 people dead, displaced more than 600,000 Kenyans (Human Rights Watch, 2008), and included an estimated 900 cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Similarly, the 2017 post-election period saw widespread instances of sexual violence purported against women and girls, often at the hands of policemen or men in uniform (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

In Kenya's highly competitive electoral environment, women encounter a range of structural and cultural obstacles to political participation – including party gatekeeping, financial exclusion and persistent gender-based violence (The Carter Center, 2018; Nyabola, 2017). While these challenges are well documented, less understood is how disinformation operates within this landscape to exacerbate gendered inequalities. Disinformation, defined here as the deliberate creation or sharing of false or misleading content to distort public perception, is only one component of the hostile online environment facing women in politics. It frequently overlaps with, yet remains analytically distinct from, direct threats of violence, misogynistic slurs and attacks (Martins, 2024; Martiny et al., 2024). Nevertheless, disinformation is often the *conduit* through which such attacks gain credibility and scale. False allegations, sexualised fabrications and manipulated visuals are used not only to deceive, but to humiliate and delegitimise, drawing on long-standing gendered scripts that frame women as unqualified, unstable or morally suspect (Siringi & Nduva, 2018). Drawing on 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts working in fields related to gendered disinformation in Kenya, and with the goal of better understanding how these dynamics are understood by those monitoring and responding to them, in this paper we ask: what framing strategies do

experts identify in gendered attacks and threats that target women in Kenyan politics, and has disinformation been used to facilitate gendered attacks in Kenyan politics?

Literature review

The growing presence of women in politics benefits democracies worldwide, but it has also disrupted established patriarchal structures, often provoking resistance (Ahmed et al., 2025; Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2016). One manifestation of this resistance is gendered disinformation, defined as false or misleading gender- and sex-based narratives used to undermine women in public life, often portraying them as inherently unqualified or otherwise unfit to participate in politics (Martiny et al., 2024). These narratives frequently draw on harmful stereotypes, framing women as weak, unintelligent, incompetent or hypersexual (Agunwa, 2024).

Gendered disinformation reinforces harmful patriarchal and heteronormative institutional and cultural structures, with impacts ranging from the social alienation of targeted individuals to more severe outcomes such as psychological harm and physical violence (Martins, 2024). In Africa, online gendered disinformation is coupled with a pervasive climate of sexual and gender-based violence, negatively impacting women's ability to participate in political life (Agunwa, 2024). Between 2021 and 2024, women's representation in African parliaments increased by only one percentage point from 25% in 2021 to 26% in 2024 (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) [IDEA], 2024). At the same time, women's representation in political party leadership has declined from 12% to 9% (International, 2024).

A study on electoral disinformation conducted in the aftermath of the 2017 and 2022 elections in Kenya identified gendered attacks on women politicians as one of the central themes of digital attacks (Madrid-Morales et al., 2025). This finding echoes an earlier study among women political candidates in Kenya that highlighted the obstacles women face when vying for political office, including sexual harassment, insults and slander, that not only derail their chances of being elected, but also prevented them from participating in future elections (The Carter Center, 2018). In answer to the gendered attacks on women in politics, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' (IFES) 'Kenya Electoral Assistance Program' (KEAP) launched the #BetterThanThis campaign in the run-up to the 2017 election (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2017).

The challenges faced by women in politics are not unique to Kenya. A study by Laher (2014, p. 103) found that women in politics are often subjected to scrutiny beyond their political contributions, with their voices criticised for being 'too high', their hemlines deemed 'too short', and their necklines considered 'too revealing'. The 2024 US presidential election saw negative coverage of Democratic Party nominee Kamala Harris based on her clothes and private life (Lalancette, 2024), including crudely misogynistic attacks by her opponent, Donald Trump (Tait, 2024). Various studies have explored the portrayal of women in Kenyan media, including the 'public constructions of femininity in Kenyan mediascapes' (Ligaga, 2020), the prevalence of stereotyping and gendered lenses in media coverage that focus on women's vulnerabilities and personal relationships (Siringi & Nduva, 2018, p. 32), and Macharia's (2016, p. 121) depiction of the commodification of women's bodies that 'focus on women's body parts rather than their capabilities'. The nature of Kenya's patriarchal society, which emphasises the 'supremacy

of the male gender', has been found to play a significant role in the media's framing of women in leadership positions (Siringi & Nduva, 2018, p. 27).

Studies on women's participation in Kenyan politics have focused on their desire to expand their existing community projects and increase opportunities for women (Carter Center, 2028), their achievements in light of the two-thirds rule enshrined in the Kenyan Constitution (Kenyatta et al., 2023), and the transactional relationships that women politicians have to participate in in order to raise their political profile (Kilimo, 2022).

Methodology

This study builds on an earlier investigation which examined key themes in disinformation during the 2017 and 2022 Kenyan elections (see Madrid-Morales et al., 2025). That report identified gendered attacks as a prominent characteristic of electoral disinformation in Kenya. In response, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore this phenomenon in greater depth through interviews with 11 individuals actively working on issues related to gendered societal barriers, attacks, threats and disinformation in Kenyan politics. Participants were purposefully selected based on their professional expertise and publications addressing Kenyan electoral disinformation and gender-based online attacks in both online and traditional media. The interviewees comprised fact-checkers, an investigative journalist, an advocate specialising in digital rights and policy, academics, and staff members from NGOs focused on women's empowerment and digital equity (see Table 1). The first round of seven interviews was conducted in May 2024, with a further four interviews in March 2025.

All interviews were conducted either in person or via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, an AI-powered tool for transcribing audio, and manually checked for accuracy. A detailed content analysis was then performed on the transcripts to identify recurring frames and patterns related to the theme of gendered attacks and disinformation.

In addition to the expert interviews, the study incorporated a supplementary media analysis to illustrate and contextualise the gendered attacks discussed by participants. This involved systematic Google searches using the names of public figures mentioned by interviewees – namely Jerotich Seii, Martha Koome, Linet Chepkorir, Millie Odhiambo and Esther Passaris – combined with the word 'attack'. Searches were conducted between March and May 2025, and were limited to English-language content from Kenyan news

Table 1. Interviewee details.

Interviewee	Gender	Occupation
1	Male	Fact-checker
2	Male	Academic
3	Female	Activist working in digital equity
4	Female	Fact-checker
5	Female	Advocate of the High Court in Kenya, working in digital rights and policy
6	Male	Academic
7	Female	Director at NGO working in women's empowerment
8	Female	Programme manager at NGO working in women's empowerment
9	Male	Academic
10	Female	Programme manager at NGO working in digital equity
11	Male	Investigative journalist

media sources. A total of nine newspaper articles and four televised interviews were selected based on their direct relevance to the cases cited in expert interviews. These sources were used to provide illustrative examples of the broader patterns identified through the qualitative analysis of the interview data. No claims are made about the comprehensiveness or representativeness of the media analysis; rather, the materials serve to triangulate expert observations with publicly documented cases.

Findings

Experts interviewed for this study described the online information landscape during Kenyan elections as a volatile mix of political polarisation, digital manipulation and identity-based attacks. Disinformation, they noted, does not emerge in isolation but often builds on pre-existing social divisions and cultural stereotypes to achieve traction. For example, Interviewee 1, the head of a fact-checking organisation based in Nairobi, observes that much of the disinformation circulating during election campaigns is designed to ‘weaponise the usual things that divide Kenyans’. According to Interviewee 1, the most common form of electoral disinformation in Kenya involves the use of ‘shallow fakes’ – manipulated versions of existing videos, often featuring politicians. These videos are edited to make the individuals appear foolish, to suggest they are making incendiary or inflammatory remarks, or to portray them as making unrealistic promises. In some cases, doctored subtitles are added to political speeches delivered in vernacular languages to distort the speaker’s message.

Our analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four recurring frames of gender-based hostility targeting women during the 2017 and 2022 Kenyan elections, as well as in the post-election periods. These frames, identified by experts across journalism, civil society, academia and digital rights, relate not only to elected women but also to female civil society leaders – particularly those, such as Linda Katiba activists, who challenged dominant political narratives. While this study focuses on disinformation, many of the attacks described by participants do not fit narrow definitions of false or misleading content. Instead, they often reflect a convergence of disinformation with online gender-based violence, reputational attacks and threats of harm. In what follows, we analyse four framing strategies that experts identified across this spectrum of gendered political hostility, with particular attention to how disinformation operates either within or alongside these framings. These are: (1) attacks rooted in traditional gender roles, including criticisms of women’s relationship or maternal status; (2) attributions of negative psychological traits, portraying women as overly emotional or mentally unstable; (3) sexualisation and objectification, encompassing body shaming, the dissemination of sexualised content, and threats of sexual violence; and (4) questioning of qualifications and competence, casting doubt on women’s legitimacy to hold public office.

Traditional gender roles

Cultural norms and traditional gender roles remain deeply embedded in Kenyan society and continue to shape perceptions of women in leadership positions. The view of women as confined to narrowly defined gender roles persist across generations, including among

younger Kenyans raised in patriarchal households. As Interviewee 4 explained, ‘many people grew up believing that women should not be in leadership roles, especially politics, where they are often seen as assistants rather than leaders’. These entrenched gender stereotypes hinder broader acceptance of women in political positions that are not subordinate to male counterparts.

Interviewee 5, an advocate of the High Court in Kenya who works in the field of digital rights and policy, underscored the difficulty of verifying political disinformation in a context saturated with sexism and misogyny. Women politicians often face gender-specific attacks that reinforce restrictive expectations, making it harder for them to assert their legitimacy in public life. When women do attain leadership positions, they are frequently singled out for failing to conform to societal expectations – such as being unmarried or single mothers.

As Interviewee 4 noted, such circumstances are often framed as ‘bringing gender and Western agendas’ into conflict with traditional cultural norms. As a result, women politicians are frequently subjected to online threats of violence. Interviewee 7, the director of an NGO focused on empowering Kenyan women in the field of media, emphasised that such abuse must be recognised as a serious issue requiring timely intervention – particularly to prevent its escalation into offline harm.

Interviewee 1 highlights the significant evolution of online disinformation between the 2017 and 2022 elections in Kenya. In 2017, the British firm Cambridge Analytica played a key role in supporting Uhuru Kenyatta’s Jubilee Party, marking an early instance of strategic digital influence. By 2022, however, social media platforms had become deeply entrenched in Kenya’s digital ecosystem. As Interviewee 1 explains, ‘the emergence of platforms such as TikTok facilitated the rapid spread of disinformation, with videos easily migrating across TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter (now X)’.

A further manifestation of traditional gender roles is the structural limitation women face in accessing the resources necessary to run successful political campaigns, according to Interviewee 7. The financial barriers women encounter reflect and reinforce their traditionally subordinate role in society, further marginalising their political participation.

Several interviewees cited activist Jerotich Seii and politician Martha Karua as prominent examples of Kenyan women who have encountered the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles – an observation corroborated by a content analysis of media reports referencing them. In a televised interview with Mwanzo TV Plus, Linda Katiba activist Jerotich Seii discussed the scrutiny women face when pursuing leadership positions in Kenya, noting that they are often interrogated about their relationship status or the absence thereof (TV, 2022). She also recounted the online abuse directed at her, describing threats made by anonymous trolls, including threats of genital mutilation, and expressing fear for the safety of her family (TV, 2022).

While such experiences highlight the intense societal pressure placed on women leaders, some do not view the challenge of balancing societal roles as a significant impediment. In an interview with TV47 Digital, Martha Karua, who is a long-serving Member of Parliament and running mate to presidential candidate Raila Odinga in the 2022 general election, remarked that she did not find it difficult to balance motherhood with her professional responsibilities. ‘It was not difficult because I didn’t see the difficulty. I was equal to the task’, she explained (Opondo,

2024). Nonetheless, she acknowledged the broader structural inequalities faced by mothers, stating, ‘mothers are always single, even within a household context, because the bulk of childcare responsibilities fall on them. They may have companionship, but the responsibility of raising children rests primarily on their shoulders.’

Interviewee 8, who works as a programme manager at an NGO focused on women’s empowerment in Kenya, cited Linet Chepkorir, popularly known as ‘Toto’, as a noteworthy example of a woman challenging traditional gender roles in Kenyan politics. Media coverage highlights Chepkorir’s historic achievement as the youngest elected politician in the 13th Parliament, having secured her seat in 2022 at the age of 24 (Kimutai, 2022; Ng’etich, 2022). According to Interviewee 8, Chepkorir’s election signals a potential shift in public perceptions, suggesting that younger generations may be increasingly receptive to women’s leadership in political spaces.

Attribution of psychological traits

Various interviewees highlighted that the attribution of negative psychological traits to women politicians result in reinforced gender stereotypes that undermine their leadership. According to Interviewee 4, a recurring narrative during the 2022 Kenyan general election portrayed women as ‘too emotional’ to hold leadership positions, rendering them unfit for high office. Simultaneously, women who exhibited assertiveness were criticised as ‘too aggressive’ or ‘overly ambitious’, further delegitimising their leadership potential.

Interviewee 7 noted that portraying women as overly emotional is a global stereotype used to discredit female politicians. Interviewee 4 added that, even in 2025, the belief that women are inherently unsuited for leadership remains widespread. Societal expectations continue to demand that women balance professional responsibilities with domestic and caregiving roles. This perception reinforces the stereotype that women are unable to fully commit to public office, thereby constraining their political opportunities.

These gendered biases were particularly evident in the case of Millie Odhiambo, a Member of Parliament widely recognised for her advocacy on women’s rights. According to Interviewee 1, rather than engaging substantively with her legislative proposals, critics often dismissed Odhiambo’s actions as efforts to cultivate a ‘tough girl’ persona. Odhiambo has publicly embraced this characterisation, affirming her assertive political style. In a 2024 session of the National Assembly, responding to the Speaker’s call for more restrained rhetoric, she stated: ‘[Women politicians] should be as bad as Millie Odhiambo. I am a bad girl, and as a bad girl I’m here serving my fourth term.’ (Mosa, 2024)

Similarly, Interviewee 8 cites the case of Martha Karua who was dubbed ‘the Iron Lady’ in the Kenyan press (Africanews, 2022; Opondo, 2024). During the 2022 election campaign, *The Standard*, Kenya’s oldest and one of its largest newspapers, described Karua as ‘visibly angry, despite her dark sunglasses’, ultimately concluding that she ‘has anger issues, which she is unable to manage in public’ (Muluka, 2022). Such portrayals illustrate how female politicians are often evaluated through a gendered lens, where assertiveness is routinely reinterpreted as emotional instability, both online and in

traditional media. This framing reinforces broader stereotypes that serve to undermine and delegitimise women's leadership.

Sexualisation of women in politics

While not all sexualised content constitutes disinformation, experts highlighted that doctored images, fabricated sex scandals and false attributions play a key role in these attacks. Gendered attacks against women politicians frequently take the form of sexualisation, a tactic aimed at discrediting them as legitimate political actors. According to Interviewee 11, an investigative journalist based in Nairobi, such attacks often insinuate that women attain political positions through sexual favours rather than merit, 'reinforcing the perception that they are undeserving of political appointments or elected positions'. Interviewee 10, a programme manager at an NGO focused on digital equity in Kenya, similarly noted that these narratives commonly attempt to associate women politicians with powerful male figures – such as the deputy president – suggesting that their success stems from personal relationships rather than professional competence.

Interviewee 8 observed that these attacks often intensify during moments of internal political party conflict, becoming a weapon to undermine women's standing within political structures. When women are targeted with revenge porn or subjected to public shaming, these forms of abuse are weaponised to delegitimise their participation in politics, further entrenching sexualised narratives over substantive assessments of their capabilities. Both Interviewee 7 and Interviewee 8 emphasised that although online criticism and hate speech are rampant, such attacks rarely escalate into physical violence – although the psychological toll remains significant.

Interviewee 7 references the case of Esther Passaris, Nairobi County's Women Representative in the Kenyan Parliament, who faced widespread online shaming after posting an image of herself in a short black dress at the beach on X to commemorate her father's passing (Passaris, 2022). The image was described in the press as 'seductive', with some questioning whether she was genuinely mourning (2022). According to Interviewee 7, this incident exemplifies how women politicians are subjected to gendered scrutiny that extends beyond their political roles, with personal appearances and behaviour frequently used to delegitimise their credibility and moral standing.

Disinformation, particularly in the form of fabricated narratives and doctored media, is increasingly used in tandem with other forms of online gender-based abuse to target women leaders. Millie Odhiambo, a Member of Parliament since 2008, has publicly addressed an incident in which a pornographic video was circulated with her face superimposed (Capital FM Kenya [FM], 2015). Fact-checking organisations interviewed for this study acknowledged that they often refrain from publicly debunking such content in order to avoid amplifying harmful misinformation. However, this silence can enable falsehoods to persist unchallenged, thereby contributing to the normalisation of sexualised disinformation.

Interviewee 7 noted that many women politicians experience profound discomfort when engaging with social media due to the volume of sexualised abuse. During a training session that the interviewee's NGO conducted with women politicians, one participant shared that scrolling through X (formerly Twitter) made her feel 'dirty' – to the extent that she felt the need to shower afterwards. While such reactions are

sometimes trivialised, they underscore the severe emotional and psychological impacts of online gender-based violence and highlight the urgent need for institutional mechanisms to address digital harassment.

Beyond direct attacks on individual politicians, sexualised imagery is also exploited in broader electoral disinformation campaigns. A study conducted by Mozilla (2021) in Kenya found that suggestive images of women are often used to bait men into following fake accounts designed to disseminate political misinformation. This strategy reveals how the sexualisation of women operates not only as a tool for personal discreditation but also as a mechanism within coordinated disinformation ecosystems.

Questioning women's qualifications and competence

Critics of Kenya's constitutional two-thirds gender provision frequently dismiss women nominated through affirmative action as 'politician's wives, girlfriends, and mistresses' (Citizen Digital, 2022). Concerns have also been raised about the transparency of the nomination process, with some alleging that women are selected merely as proxies for male political figures. According to Interviewee 10, this rhetoric manifests in the frequent labelling of women politicians as 'slay queens' or 'socialites', implying that their political ascent is rooted in personal relationships with powerful men rather than merit or competence.

Interviewee 7 described these attacks as 'below-the-neck', where the scrutiny directed at women focuses not on their political ideas or policy proposals, but on their bodies, personal relationships and affiliations. 'The assumption is that they couldn't have achieved this on their own – that they must be involved with a powerful man within the party. These attacks, which target women's personal lives rather than their competence, are pervasive', said Interviewee 7. The unequal scrutiny applied to women also shapes how their actions are judged. Interviewee 10 pointed out that when women politicians are implicated in wrongdoing, the backlash is often disproportionately harsh. 'Any misconduct by a woman is immediately framed as unacceptable because she is a woman', they said. 'When male politicians steal or cheat, it does not provoke the same level of moral outrage.'

Interviewee 4, a representative from a Kenyan fact-checking organisation, stressed that gendered disinformation is not confined to electoral politics but affects women in leadership more broadly. 'Whenever a woman is called upon to share her expertise or opinions, the first line of attack is often to question her qualifications', they noted. This tendency is particularly evident when women are perceived to be outperforming or challenging their male counterparts in public discourse. According to Interviewee 4, such dismissals act as a powerful deterrent to women's participation in political life.

In February 2025, gendered disinformation was evident in a fake graphic circulated on social media featuring Igembe North Member of Parliament Julius Taitumu. The image included a fabricated quote falsely attributed to Taitumu, criticising the appointment of Chief Justice Martha Koome and claiming that 'many male judges' were more qualified. A fact-checking investigation debunked the graphic, noting that it reinforced gender bias by implying that Koome, and by extension other women in leadership, were unfit for high office based solely on their gender (Juma, 2025).

Conclusion

This study examined the framing strategies of gendered attacks on public leaders in Kenya by drawing on interviews with Kenyan experts (i.e., fact-checkers, an investigative journalist, an advocate specialising in digital rights and policy, and staff members from NGOs focused on women's empowerment and digital equity) and analysing media coverage of women politicians active during the 2017 and 2022 general elections. Findings indicate that gendered attacks on women politicians are pervasive across both national and county levels of government. Online harassment, in particular, has a profound psychological impact with examples of women reducing or entirely withdrawing from social media engagement, especially those running public campaigns. As one interviewee explained, fear of harassment discourages women from posting or reading comments, leading to diminished visibility and reduced interaction with supporters. This climate of fear fosters self-censorship, influencing the topics women are willing to address publicly and pushing them towards safer, less controversial content.

The effects extend beyond social media platforms. Interviewees reported that some women decline media interviews or public appearances due to the risk of misrepresentation and further online attacks. While measures such as disabling comment sections may help manage abuse, they also restrict valuable public engagement. Moreover, gendered disinformation has significant reputational consequences. False narratives, such as accusations of emotional instability (as in the case of Martha Karua), continue to influence public opinion even after they are debunked, highlighting the enduring power of disinformation in shaping voter attitudes. These narratives feed pre-existing cultural beliefs about women's legitimacy and reinforce institutional exclusions. Taken together, the findings suggest that gendered disinformation operates not merely as discursive harm, but as an instrument that directly undermines women's political visibility, credibility, and participation.

These findings point to the need for a multi-pronged policy response that addresses the structural, technological and sociocultural dimensions of gendered disinformation. First, electoral bodies and media regulators in Kenya could work in closer partnership with civil society organisations focused on women's political empowerment to develop guidelines for the timely identification and response to gendered disinformation during election periods. Second, there is plenty of scope for social media platforms to invest in moderation capacity, particularly in local languages, and expand their use of gender-sensitive risk frameworks to flag manipulated content, especially shallowfakes and sexualised disinformation. Third, legal reforms could be explored to enhance protections against digitally manipulated content and non-consensual sexual imagery, building on existing provisions in the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act. Finally, digital literacy campaigns, particularly those targeting youth and first-time voters, could include modules that challenge gendered stereotypes and teach users how to critically identify disinformation tactics rooted in misogyny. In any case, these interventions should be designed not in isolation but as part of a broader commitment to safeguarding women's equal participation in public life.

This study's scope was limited to interviews with professionals and stakeholders in the field. Future research should incorporate the perspectives of women politicians

themselves to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences with gendered attacks. While this analysis centres on Kenya, the findings reflect a broader trend. As Interviewee 2 noted, gendered disinformation is not unique to the Kenyan context but is a growing regional and global phenomenon, and recent studies, predominantly led by civil society organisations (e.g., Martins, 2024; Martiny et al., 2024), attest to this growth. This exploratory paper is, at the same time, a call for more academic research on the subject.

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AI disclosure statement

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