

Online Gender-Based Violence against female politicians in Ghana:

evidence from selected online platforms
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Introduction

The internet is a great enabler for the exercise of rights and freedoms, and an invaluable platform of limitless opportunities for personal development and advancement. It fosters popular participation and inclusion. It has, thus, been described as a powerful tool for bridging inequalities and ensuring a more equal and equitable society/future. However, many women remain unconnected, a disadvantaged situation that is denying them a lot of opportunities. The internet is, therefore, becoming another extension of the inequalities offline.

The disparity between men and women in getting connected to the internet and other digital spaces is largely due to factors such as accessibility, affordability digital literacy and online safety challenges. Research shows that some women are unwilling to stay online for fear of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV). The relatively few women online sometimes simply limit their online activities or self-censor to avoid OGBV. This inhibits public participation, innovation, creativity and actualisation of goals and ambitions.

For female politicians who need to take advantage of the unique platform the internet and other digital spaces offer for engagement and mobilisation, campaigning and increasing their visibility for votes and their political career, OGBV remain a huge barrier. Perpetrators of OGBV exploit online platforms to malign, intimidate and harass outspoken women, especially journalists, public figures and female politicians, to silence them. OGBV also quell ambitious young women in their online engagements. A lot needs to be done to mitigate the menace and minimise the harm to ensure inclusivity in all aspects of governance, especially during this electioneering period ahead of the December 7 presidential and parliamentary polls.

As part of measures to address OGBV; encourage women's participation in online spaces and foster a more conducive online environment for engagement and marketing of ideologies and campaign messages of female politicians, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with funding support from the Dutch Foreign Ministry through the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana, is implementing a project on *Improving the safety and use of social media for female politicians in Ghana*. The project aims to address women's safety issues on social media, and build the capacity of female politicians to better use the internet in advancing their political ambitions, especially towards Ghana's 2024 general elections, and beyond.

A mapping report on OGBV against female politicians in Ghana has been produced as part of the project to highlight the nature, prevalence and experiences of female politicians. The MFWA has also built the capacity of over 200 female politicians across the country on social media use and safety practices online. The MFWA also trained 30 social media influencers and women's rights activists on countering OGBV. The organisation is also monitoring and reporting on the use of OGBV across five online platforms to discourage the practice; and gather scientific evidence on the issue to inform public discourse, advocacy interventions and policy considerations.

This report focuses on the monitoring and reporting of OGBV for the month of October 2024. Details about the methodology used for the monitoring and the findings from the daily monitoring are presented below.

Methodology

The monitoring and reporting of OGBV in Ghana is guided by a monitoring instrument that was developed and validated by experts in academia and industry. The content of the instrument, especially the definition and operationalisation of the different types or categories of OGBV, were informed by existing literature on the subject. Once the instrument was validated, monitors were selected through a competitive process of publishing a call, shortlisting applicants and interviewing. A total of 10 monitors were recruited for the task. The monitors were trained on the validated instrument, and carried out pretesting sessions before the actual rollout of the monitoring exercise.

Five online platforms have been selected for the monitoring – Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok and Ghanaweb. The selection of these platforms was informed by existing literature, findings of MFWA's recent mapping report on OGBV against female politicians in Ghana, and experiences and learnings from the social media context in Ghana. Whereas four of the platforms (Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram and TikTok) are social media platforms that allow for content generation and engagement, Ghanaweb is an online news portal. Ghanaweb was added because its comments section functions in a similar pattern as the other social media platforms. It allows for conversations around specific themes. Ghanaweb was also added because from findings of MFWA's previous monitoring of social media platforms during electioneering campaigns, a lot of conversations (including some OGBV content) take place at the comments section of the platform.

The accounts being monitored were purposively sampled to ensure that as much as possible, the accounts of many female politicians in the country could be covered. The

accounts selected include the those of all female parliamentarians on the four social media platforms selected and that of the presidential and vice-presidential Candidates of the major political parties in the country (New Patriotic Party (NPP), National Democratic Congress (NDC), Convention Peoples' Party (CPP), People's National Convention (PNC), Movement for Change and one of the four Independent Candidates recognised by Ghana's Electoral Commission). Also, the social media accounts of political party communicators and the spokespersons of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates on the four social media platforms were monitored. The social media accounts of some social media influencers and popular individuals were also sampled for the monitoring. The social media accounts were randomly assigned to the trained monitors.

Using the validated instrument and a coding schedule, the monitors undertake daily monitoring (morning, afternoon, evening and night) and record their findings. Each monitor submits daily monitoring reports to the MFWA accompanied by URLs, screenshots and videos for crosschecking. The reports are vetted, collated and analysed monthly using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) by a team of researchers who use the findings to produce monthly reports. The reports are then designed and published to inform public discourse, advocacy interventions and policy considerations.

The monitoring spans, five months (August to December 2024). The report below covers findings from the monitoring undertaken from October 1 to 31, 2024.

Findings

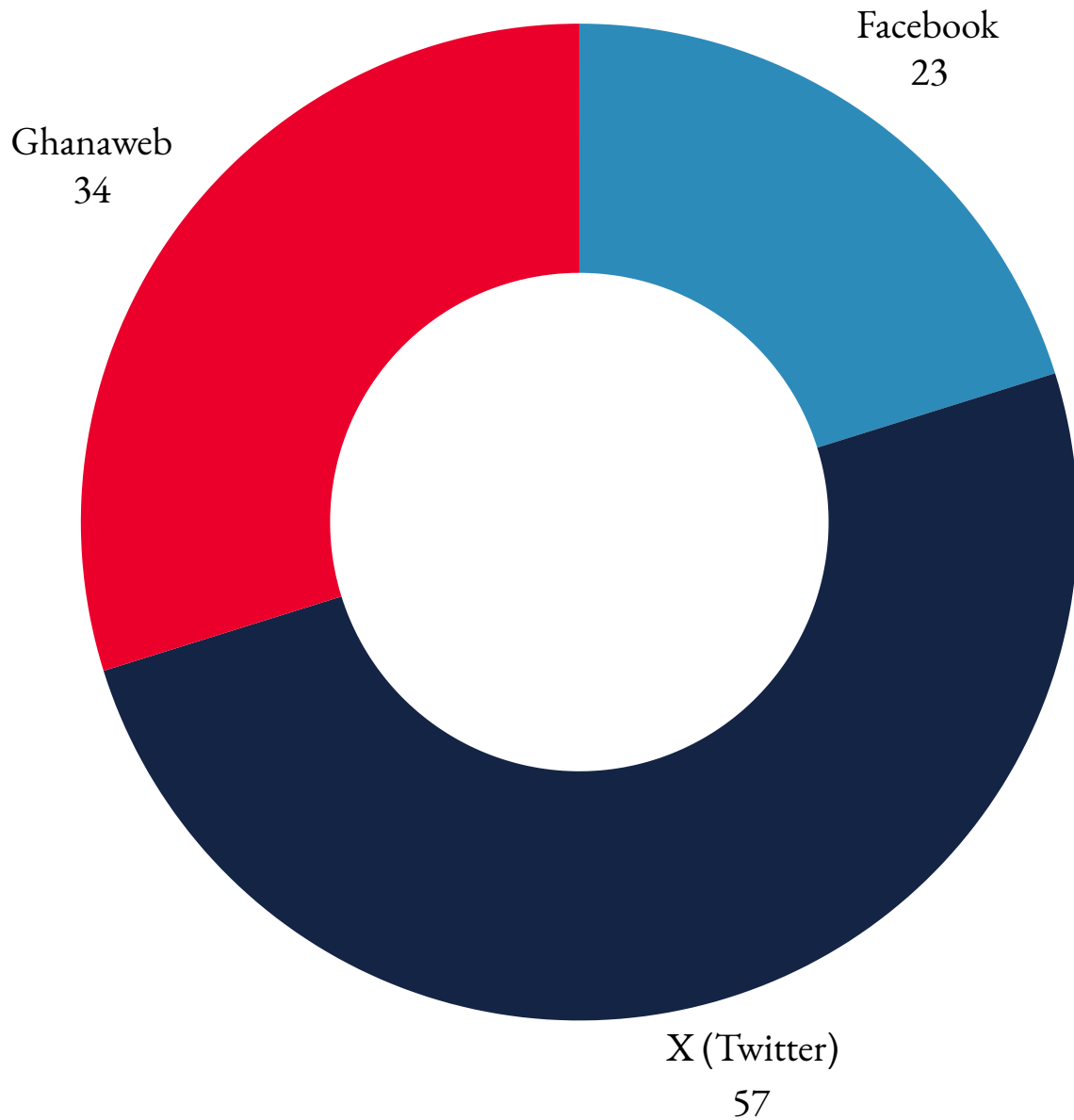
The findings from the one-month monitoring are presented below under the following two broad subheadings: incidents of OGBV and types of OGBV recorded.

Incidents of OGBV recorded

For the reporting period (October 2024), 373 monitoring reports were received from the 10 monitors recruited and assigned to the sampled accounts being monitored under this activity. Whereas some of the sampled accounts were very active, others were either completely inactive or active occasionally. Altogether, 114 Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) incidents were captured from October 1 to 31, 2024.

Out of the five online platforms selected for the monitoring, OGBV posts were cited on three: Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Ghanaweb. No OGBV post was recorded on Instagram and TikTok. This is largely as a result of the fact that a number of the sampled accounts on were less active on the two platforms. The occasional engagements on the two platforms did not result in OGBV cases. The total number of OGBV posts recorded on Facebook, X (Twitter) and Ghanaweb are presented in Chart 1 below with X (Twitter) recording half (50%) of the OGBV cases.

Chart 1: Frequency of OGBV recorded on the selected Platforms



The 114 OGBV cases cited were recorded during discussions around a number of issues. These included a demonstration by a group called, Democracy Hub; Akua Donkor's (the Presidential Candidate of the Ghana Freedom Party) intention to sue former President Mahama; Ghana's Supreme Court's ruling about four vacant seats in Parliament; among other issues. All the subjects of discussion during which the 114 OGBV cited were made are captured in Table 1.

Findings

Table 1: Subjects of discussion that elicited OGBV

Subject Matter	Frequency
Democracy hub demonstration, arrests & matters arising	29
General politicking by the NPP & the NDC	22
Akua Donkor to sue former President Mahama over derogatory remarks	14
Supreme Court ruling on 4 vacant seats in parliament & matters arising	13
Vacant seats in parliament & matters arising	10
Other issues (including matters arising from EOCO bust, and other random posts that containe OGBV)	9
Social issues	8
EC and elections related issues	6
Illegal mining (galamsey) & related issues	3
Total	114

About 94 percent of the OGBV posts recorded were expressed in the English language. The remaining six percent of the OGBV incidents were expressed in local languages such as Ga, Ewe and Akan, which was the dominant local language used. All the OGBVs expressed are condemnable, but the expressions made in the local languages were very distasteful and unprintable.

Findings

All the OGBV posts recorded were made by accounts belonging to individuals, with many of them using pseudo names. As a result, it was quite challenging tracing the real identities behind a good number of the account. However, some could be identified. Twelve of the accounts were identified as affiliates of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and another 37 were identified as affiliates of the major opposition political party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC).

Close to half (55) of the OGBV incidents were made by individuals/accounts whose gender could not be determined. The remaining 59 of the OGBV cases were made by 40 males (with some making more than one OGBV post) and nine females.

The OGBV posts cited were generally targeted at female politicians. Just a handful (11%) were directed at non-politicians. In most instances, the OGBV was directed at the target only. In two cases, however, the OGBV posts were directed at the targets and their families. And in the case of other eight posts, the OGBV cases were directed at the target and their political party and/or tribe. However, there was no reprisal from any of those targeted with the OGBV posts.

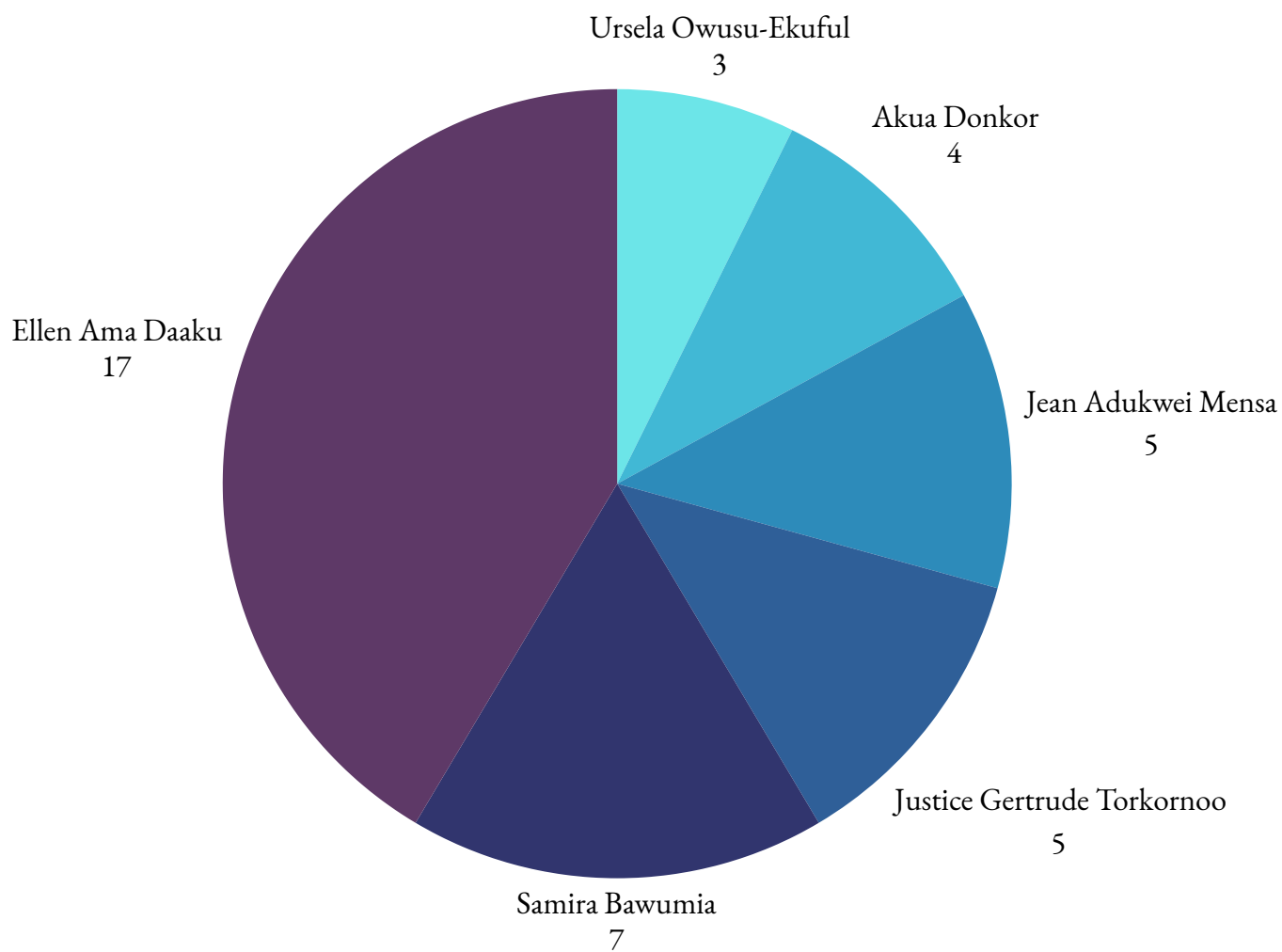
Six females were targeted with 41 (36%) of the OGBV cases recorded. A minimum of two OGBV posts were directed at each of them. The OGBV attacked their personality, intelligence, competencies, credibility and physical attributes.

Ellen Ama Daaku, a member of the NPP communications team, was attacked with 17 (15%) of the OGBV posts recorded on all the three platforms that recorded OGBV cases. Nine of the 17 OGBV attacks were in the form of body shaming. Almost every part of her body was attacked. In a number of instances, she was referred to as 'Man' or 'ManWoman.' The same level of coordinated attacks observed in the September 2024 report was also observed during the October monitoring period.

The wife of the Vice President, Samira Bawumia was also attacked with a number of OGBV remarks. The attacks were generally in the form of name calling, derogatory remarks and insults. The Chief Justice of the Republic, Her Ladyship Justice Gertrude Araba Esaaba Sackey Torkornoo also received a number of OGBV attacks following the Supreme Court's ruling about some four vacant seats in Ghana's Parliament.

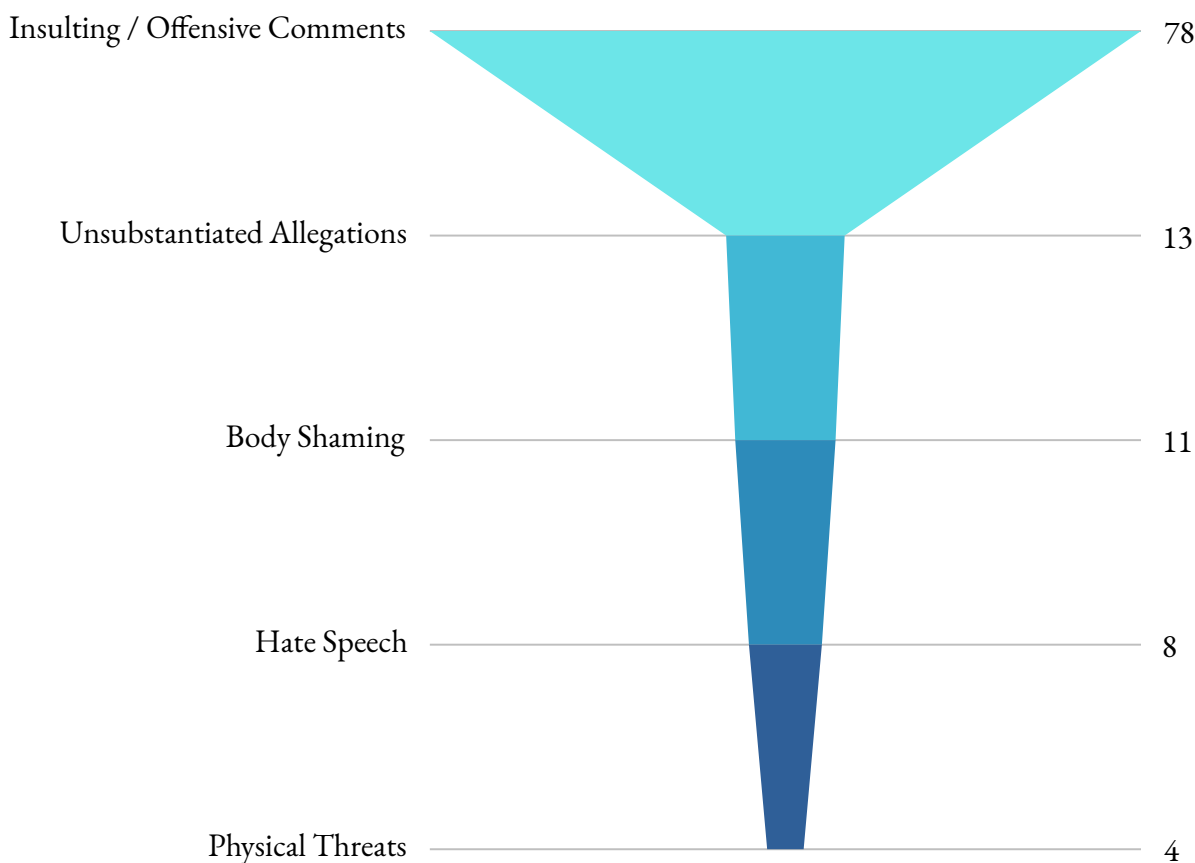
All the females who were attacked with more than two OGBV content are presented in Chart 2 below.

Chart 3: *Frequency of OGBV targeted at specific females*



Types of OGBV recorded

Five categories of OGBV were recorded during the monitoring – insulting/offensive comments, unsubstantiated allegations, body shaming, hate speech and threat of physical attack. The frequencies of each are illustrated in Chart 3 below.



Most of the insulting and/or offensive comments and hate speeches were made on X (Twitter), followed by Ghanaweb. Facebook recorded more than half of the body shaming posts. And all the four threats of physical attacks were made on X (Twitter).

For this period of monitoring, there were three OGBV cases that used the female genitalia (of the mother of a target) as an insult or an offensive/provocative remark. As noted in previous reports, the female genitalia (of a target's mother) is mostly used as an insult or an offensive/provocative remark in some parts of Ghana. The practice is, however, frowned upon.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The prevalence of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) in the Ghanaian online space is quite worrying. Although the 114 incidents of OGBV cited in this report for the month of October 2024 is a reduced frequency from the 183 reported in September 2024, over 100 incidents of OGBV on three platforms for a month is still concerning. It is a cause for worry because a single OGBV is enough to keep a good number of women away from online engagements which could be detrimental to achieving their goals. And for female politicians, staying offline is tantamount to losing votes.

The issue of OGBV and its impact must, therefore, be addressed as a matter of necessity. Government needs to engage multistakeholders (social media platforms, civil society, academia, traditional authorities, the media, among other relevant stakeholders) to deliberate on the menace and discuss policy options to address the issue without compromising the right to expression, information, opinion and association. Stiffer punishments must be put in place and enforced to make perpetrators accountable and deter others from the practice

Media and digital literacy interventions must also be set in motion to educate and sensitise people against the practice. Such literacy efforts must draw attention to the need to focus on issues and not personality attacks in discourse; the need for civility and political tolerance, and the implications of OGBV on digital gender gap and the socio-economic and political fortunes of women, including female politicians.


Civil society organisations working on governance and women empowerment, women's rights online, as well as the media, on their part, should continue to highlight OGBV issues in their engagements with government and industry players. Public forums and policy dialogues on the issue are also critical in bringing the issue to the attention of the public and duty-bearers.



Capacity building on staying safe online and how to deal and manage instances of OGBV must also be pursued to empower women, especially female politicians to safely and confidently navigate online and digital spaces to pursue their dreams. Solidarity groups should be formed to facilitate group support, peer learning and coordinated push-back measures. Political parties must also stand up for their female aspirants when they are attacked. They must publicly condemn the act and where possible, support their candidates in seeking redress through legal means.



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