

Online Gender-Based Violence Against Female Politicians In Ghana

Nature, Prevalence And Experiences



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

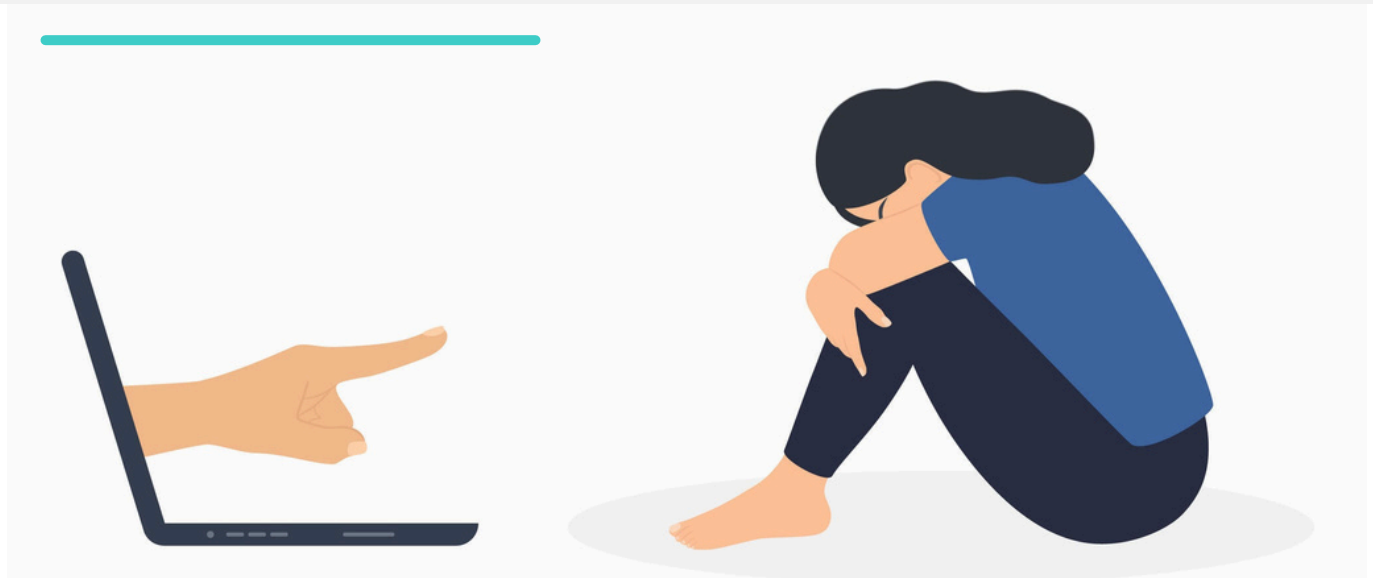
The birth of digital spaces has significantly expanded the opportunity for women to participate in civic discourses and governance. For female politicians, the opportunity is even more compelling, given the easier access digital spaces give to wider audiences, the opportunity for positioning themselves, and the room for showcasing their political activities. However, online spaces pose a double-edged sword to female politicians. By the same measure that they present them with opportunities, online spaces can present an avenue for gender-based violence.

This study sought to examine the incidence and prevalence of online gender-based violence (OGBV) towards female politicians in Ghana. In particular, the study assessed the extent of such attacks, the forms they take and the circumstances of their occurrence. It also explored the lived experiences of a purposively selected group of female politicians to document their accounts, and understand their coping strategies as well as the effects of such violence on them. This report, therefore, proposes a number of evidence-based recommendations drawing from the findings, key among which include:

- Public commentary on news about female politicians is the worst avenue for OGBV both in terms of prevalence and scope of attacks.
- Online news media are complicit in OGBV, tending to frame news about female politicians to invite attacks.
- Attacks on female politicians comprise a complex mix of hate speech, information manipulation, harassment, cyber bullying, condescension, non-consensual sharing of private information, etc.
- OGBV attacks are more likely than not to be occasioned by stories about the political activities of female politicians, suggesting the chilling possibility that female participation in politics is deemed a misnomer and therefore something to be attacked.

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- At the root of OGBV against female politicians lies several drivers including patriarchy, male perceptions of competition with women, vendetta, freedom and anonymity enjoyed by online users, and the nature of Ghana's politics.
 - OGBV against female politicians is perpetrated by both males and females with the former being guiltier.
 - Besides being gendered, perpetrators of OGBV are generally political opponents, or anti male-female equality.
 - OGBV is very costly to female politicians, forcing them to self-censor, acquiesce to problematic norms, or miss out on opportunities.
 - To address these negative effects of OGBV, female politicians resort to a number of strategies, including digital detoxing, retaliation, reduced direct engagements online, deleting and blocking, reporting and public education.

INTRODUCTION



Globally, the imbalance in the threat posed by online gender-based violence (OGBV) to females in different professions in comparison to their male colleagues has been acknowledged by researchers¹. While the internet has expanded the spaces for women to grow their careers, it also represents a strong forum for perpetuating gender-based violence. For instance, it enables faceless persons to perpetuate attacks that ride on large internet audiences to gain momentum. As acknowledged by the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in her report to the thirty-eighth session of UN Human Rights Council, “in the digital age, the Internet has become a new battleground in the struggle for women’s rights, amplifying opportunities for women to express themselves but also multiplying possibilities for repression.”

For women who venture into politics, this could not be truer. Online spaces afford them a more democratised space to exercise voice, build visibility for themselves and their agenda, and reach to large audiences of potential voters. However, the internet is also a place for replicating the fault lines in societies including gendered ideologies and patriarchy. Like other women, female politicians suffer various forms of OGBV including dissemination of their private information, verbal abuse, sexual harassment,

1. Zviyita, I., & Mare, A. (2024). Same threats, different platforms? Female journalists' experiences of online gender-based violence in selected newsrooms in Namibia. *Journalism*, 25(4), 779-799.

hate speech and manipulation of their information.

Irrespective of the form it takes, OGBV is known to inflict very negative outcomes on women. For female politicians, this can include forcing a culture of silence on them where they become too afraid of attacks that arise from their exercise of voice and free speech. Very importantly, OGBV can also serve to restrict female politicians' impact and opportunities. This study explores these issues in the Ghanaian context.

WOMEN AND POLITICS IN GHANA

Historically, women in Ghana have played important roles beyond domestic spaces. This includes their participation in political spaces, albeit not with equality in status to men. Among the Akans², for example, women have long occupied the role of hemma [queen] which is imbued with leadership powers including membership of the general assembly of rulers, participation in legislative and judicial processes, and the selection and destoolment of chiefs³.

In spite of their important roles in both domestic and public life, women's contribution was not duly acknowledged, as physical strength-based activities such as warfare and state expansion elevated men over women. This was exacerbated by colonial rule as British rulers "dismantled those aspects of African conceptions that provided women with some autonomy" including taking away recognition of women in the colonial chiefs list, and their membership of native councils and courts². Besides this, exploitation of women's labour which was appropriated within kinship structures and emphasis on male education deepened male superiority and entry into the civil service which would eventually pave the way for unequal access to national politics and political power.

2. Akans are the largest ethnic group in Ghana, spread across the southern and middle belts of the country.

3. Ampofo, A. A., & Atobrah, D. (2023). Women in Ghana. In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History.

Yet, women have played significant roles in Ghana's independence struggles, and self-government. Their political activism through, for instance, organized cocoa hold-ups and feeding of political activists, as well as their role as foot soldiers galvanised the independence movement. Notable women such as Mabel Dove Danquah and Akua Asabea Ayisi, worked closely with the male top class in the fight for independence. Indeed, some of these assumed leadership roles in national politics. These included Mabel Dove Danquah who was the first female member of the legislative assembly in the Gold Coast and Susan Alhassan who was Ghana's first woman minister of state (for Education and Social Welfare) and a member of parliament for the Northern region.

Post-independence, women have continued to actively participate in politics at both grassroots and national levels. However, their representation is woefully low. For instance, at the local assembly level, females constitute less than five percent of recently elected assembly members⁴. Metropolitan, municipal and district assembly chief executives have only 15 percent female representation. A similar average represents the count of females in parliament. Thus, in spite of their active interest and participation in the political life of Ghana, both historically and in contemporary times, women have been saddled with limited political presence, power and influence. This is made worse by patriarchal structures in society that make women's participation in active politics to be an unwelcome reality to many, prompting stereotyping, stigmatisation, confinement and abuse.

ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, THE LAW AND FEMALE POLITICIANS

OGBV is globally recognised as a threat to women's rights and progress in societies⁵. It is rooted in, and replicates its predecessor, offline gender-based violence. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

4 2024 Inauguration of District Assemblies and Unit Committees: Women still underrepresented? (modernghana.com)

5 Rico, M. N. (1997). Gender-Based Violence: A human rights issue.

(CEDAW) describes gender-based violence as violence directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately⁶. According to the CEDAW, gender-based violence against women is rooted in gender-related factors, such as the ideology of men's entitlement and privilege over women, social norms regarding masculinity, and the need to assert male control or power, enforce gender roles or prevent, discourage or punish what is considered to be unacceptable female behaviour⁷.

International law, under the auspices of the CEDAW, frowns on gender-based violence and enjoins countries to address it by instituting measures to prevent, prosecute and punish perpetrators and provide redress for victims and survivors.

OGBV appropriates the meaning of gender-based violence to situate it within digital spaces. In other words, OGBV refers to violence directed disproportionately at women within online spaces. Such violence may inflict physical, mental or sexual harm on women and manifest variously, including online hate, stalking, harassment, cyber-flashing, trolling, sexting, and online bullying etc⁸. Like its antecedent, gender-based violence (offline), OGBV is recognised as harmful and a human rights issue. However, unlike other forms of violence, OGBV's affront on women's human rights intersects with the denial of other rights including of expression and participation in digital spaces⁴. Beyond flouting the CEDAW's expectation of protection of women against all forms of violence, OGBV also flouts provisions in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that espouse individuals' rights to hold and express opinions across different media. This is because when OGBV makes digital spaces unsafe and unfriendly to women, it has the potential to chill them out of participation in public discourses, and expression of voice and opinion.

Beyond global level provisions for protecting women against gender-based violence and against affronts to their rights to opinions, free expression and participation,

6 CEDAW Committee, General recommendation No. 19 on violence against women

7 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-commentsand-recommendations/general-recommendation-no-35-2017-gender-based>. Emphasis added.

8 Barker, K., & Jurasz, O. (2023). Digital and online violence: International perspectives. *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, 1-4.

regional protocols also exist, as do national provisions. The African Union's Maputo Protocol⁹ to which Ghana is signatory enjoins African countries to protect women from harm and discrimination while guaranteeing their right to participation in public discourse, decision making processes and governance. While the protocol does not directly address OGBV, the spirit of its provisions are just as applicable. Accordingly, beyond global level protections that should secure female politicians from OGBV, Ghana's commitments under the Maputo Protocol enjoins her to take proactive measures to protect women in digital spaces. Ghana has a responsibility to take steps to remove barriers that hinder women's participation in digital spaces. This is even more so for female politicians whose entry into the political arena, which for many should be the preserve of men, makes them particularly prone to gendered attacks.

The current infrastructure for protecting users of digital spaces from harm is housed under the Cyber Security Authority. Established by the Cyber Security Act 2020 (Act 1038) to regulate cyber security activities in Ghana, the Authority's mandate covers various cybercrimes, including cyber stalking, harassment, and the unauthorized disclosure of private data. Thus, the Authority represents an operationalisation of Act 1038 in providing an avenue for recourse for individuals targeted online. The Act provides for reporting, investigation and referral for remedy of several forms of cybercrimes including the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sexual extortion, cyberstalking, taking and publication of indecent images, blackmail, etc.

While provisions address offences that are generally gendered and suffered disproportionately by women, the Act does not directly address the subject of OGBV in name. It is anticipated that the legislative instrument to fully operationalise the Act, which is in development, may adopt a more proactive approach to tackling OGBV. At the present, the Authority is constrained in its work in adopting a gendered lens in its operations. Even so, inquiries at the Authority show that its reporting desks receive a good number of complaints which are gendered in nature.

9. African Union (2003). Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

Besides the Cyber Security Act, the Authority also works with other laws pertaining to the cyber space that have implications for OGBV. These include the Data Protection Act (Act 843). Beyond the Authority, other state institutions have mandates with interests that should intersect with OGBV. For instance, the Ghana Police Service has investigative and prosecutorial powers in matters of OGBV.

OGBV: A GLOBAL THREAT IN CHARACTER AND INCIDENCE

Existing knowledge converges on the notion of OGBV as a global problem. Rooted in, and extending the reach of gender-based violence offline, OGBV is fuelled by the growth in and increasing access to digital technology and spaces. Analysis of underlying drivers of OGBV highlights historical power imbalance and gender inequality, and normative expectations about gender roles¹¹.

Across all regions of the globe, OGBV has assumed prominence in its incidence. A recent report showing global evidence of the prevalence and impact of OGBV shows that it is spread widely across countries, more targeted at females and intersects with other factors of inequality such as race and disability¹⁰. Similar evidence has been reported about Latin America¹¹, Asia¹² and Africa^{13 14}.

OGBV is known to manifest in varied forms. These include cyberbullying, cyber-harassment, doxing, hate speech, body shaming, trolling, cyberstalking, sextortion and the sharing of non-consensual personal information, as documented by several

¹⁰ [Global Evidence on the Prevalence and Impact of Online Gender-based Violence \(OGBV\) \(ids.ac.uk\)](#)

¹¹ [report_onlineviolence_21dec23.pdf \(unwomen.org\)](#)

¹² [A Scoping Review of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Low- and Middle-Income Countries Across Asia - Vaiddehi Bansal, Mayumi Rezwan, Mithila Iyer, Erin Leasure, Connor Roth, Poulomi Pal, Laura Hinson, 2024 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

¹³ [Same threats, different platforms? Female journalists' experiences of online gender-based violence in selected newsrooms in Namibia - Itai Zviyita, Admire Mare, 2024 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

¹⁴ [A Resource Mobilisation Study of how Facebook Enables Gender-Base Violence in the Online Space in South Africa | Gender and Behaviour \(journals.co.za\)](#)

reports and scholars¹⁵. Irrespective of the form it takes, OGBV is known to affect women more than men. It is also known to be unequally targeted at women with public voices such as politicians, activists and journalists¹⁶. For instance, an International Federation of Journalists report revealed that a total of 64% female journalists have experienced online gender-based violence¹⁷.

OGBV can be perpetuated and experienced in all digital spaces although existing evidence shows that social media are the biggest culprits. Their affordance of anonymity and pseudonymity, content amplification, synchronised users' interests and easy network creation, makes it easy for OGBV to thrive.

There is clear evidence that OGBV has very negative consequences on its victims. Macro level effects include compromised citizen freedom interfering with democratic and civic participation, undermined democracy and economic losses. At the individual level, OGBV can lead to the silencing of voices, felt sense of insecurity and inequality, and loss of opportunities.

In spite of these concerns, digital spaces within which OGBV occur present a double-edged sword for which reason victims, particularly women cannot boycott. They empower participation, give room for voice expression and felt meaningfulness while also providing avenues for women to exploit economic, political and social benefits,

¹⁵ https://lac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/report_onlineviolence_21dec23.pdf (unwomen.org)

¹⁶ Same threats, different platforms? Female journalists' experiences of online gender-based violence in selected newsrooms in Namibia - Itai Zviyita. *Admire Mare*. 2024 (sagepub.com)

¹⁷ IFJ global survey shows massive impact of online abuse on women journalists. <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/ifj-global-survey-shows-massive-impact-of-online-abuse-on-women-journalists>

METHODOLOGY



This report is based on evidence gathered through a mixed method design using two modes of inquiry – content analysis and interviews. The purpose of the content analysis study was to gain a sense of the extent and forms of online gender-based violence as well as the circumstances surrounding their occurrence. Two studies were conducted using this mode of inquiry. In the first instance, the Facebook pages of a purposive sample of five highly visible female politicians were analysed to understand the nature of OGBV attacks within their personal online spaces. The choice of the women as focal cases was informed by their visibility within the Ghanaian political space. All five are parliamentarians, with two doubling as ministers and one being a minister designate. Further, the choice of Facebook as the empirical setting was informed by its popularity for public discourse in Ghana, and among the demographic of which the political class is part.

For each sampled case [female politician], selection of content for analysis was pinned to one month before their participation in a major political contest e.g. parliamentary primaries, party executive elections etc. During this period, their five most popular posts [with the most engagement] were selected. For each, the first twenty comments were analysed to assess the incidence and extent of OGBV. Where comments of a selected post were less than 20, they were all included. Individual comments were the units of analysis. Where comments had generated threads, only the originating comment was included in analysis. For each comment sampled, coding focused on the presence or absence of OGBV content, the form of OGBV if any, and whether there was a spurious or germane relationship between the post generating the comments.

In the second content analysis study, a general google search was conducted for references to ten visible female politicians in the country. The sampled individuals included current and former ministers, members of parliament, political party executives, and a vice presidential candidate. Using their names as key words, a general google search was conducted. The top ten news items on them were selected for analysis. Each was analysed for the presence or absence of OGBV towards the female politician, the form it took if any, the source of the attack and the presence or absence of OGBV in in the comments section, if any.

In the case of the interview-based study, in-depth interviews were conducted with six purposively sampled female politicians to explore their personal experiences with OGBV. In all, ten potential interviewees were contacted via WhatsApp to introduce the project, and to seek their participation. While they all accepted to grant interviews, only six eventually made time to participate. However, it was noted that their experiences had commonalities which means that a point of saturation was easy to reach. They included four members of parliament, an unsuccessful parliamentary candidate and an unsuccessful district assembly candidate. Two of the parliamentarians were also former ministers of state.

Interviews were held remotely, via phone in March 2024. Before interviews, interviewees were briefed again about the purpose of the study and their permission sought to record the conversation. Interviews averaged 25 minutes and were each transcribed prior to analysis. Given the sensitive nature of the issue, the identity of interviewees have been masked by assigning them codes, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Profile of interviewees

ID	Roles	Social media profile
FP1	Member of Parliament	Present on Facebook, X and Instagram
FP2	Unsuccessful MP aspirant	Present on Facebook and WhatsApp
FP3	Unsuccessful district assembly member aspirant	Present on Facebook and Instagram
FP4	Member of Parliament	Present on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.
FP5	Former minister and former ambassador	Present on Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp
FP6	Member of Parliament	Present on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram

Both content analysis studies were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools while analysis of interview data focused on identifying patterns to synthesize into themes.

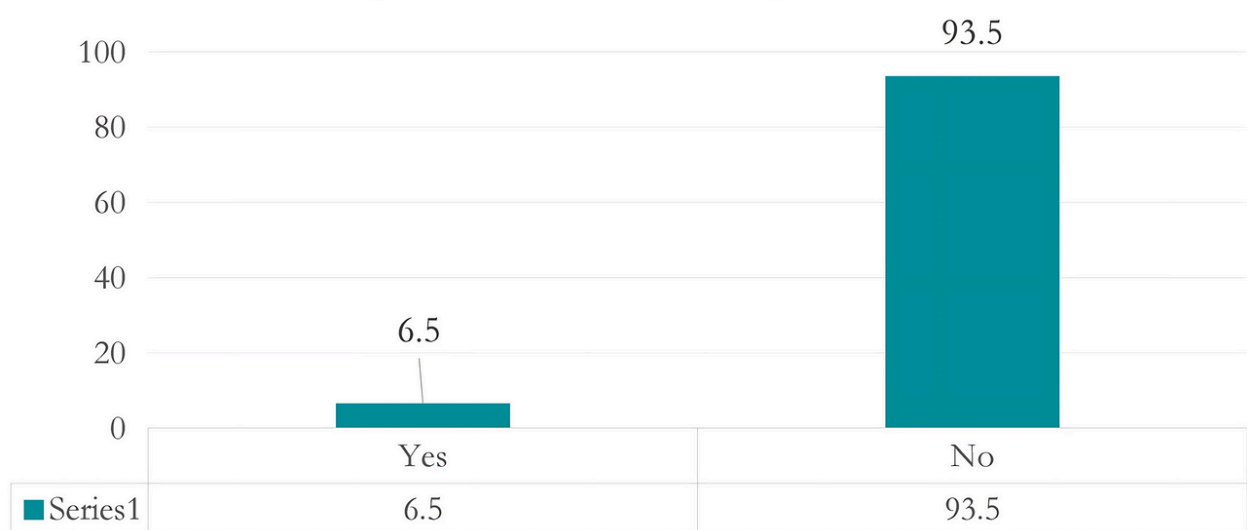


FINDINGS

PREVALENCE OF OGBV IN FEMALE POLITICIANS' PERSONAL SPACES

As a first step to gauging the extent of OGBV faced by female politicians, the study assessed attacks directed at them via their personal spaces. The evidence from the analysis of comments to posts shared by the sampled female politicians on their Facebook pages shows that such attacks are minimal in such spaces. Ninety-three percent [N = 430] of comments analysed included no OGBV references. While this is gratifying to note, the fact that about seven percent of the comments included OGBV is a worry nonetheless. Every instance of OGBV is one too many. And yet, as the data in Fig. 1 shows, nearly seven percent of such comments in response to posts by the female politicians included attacks on them.

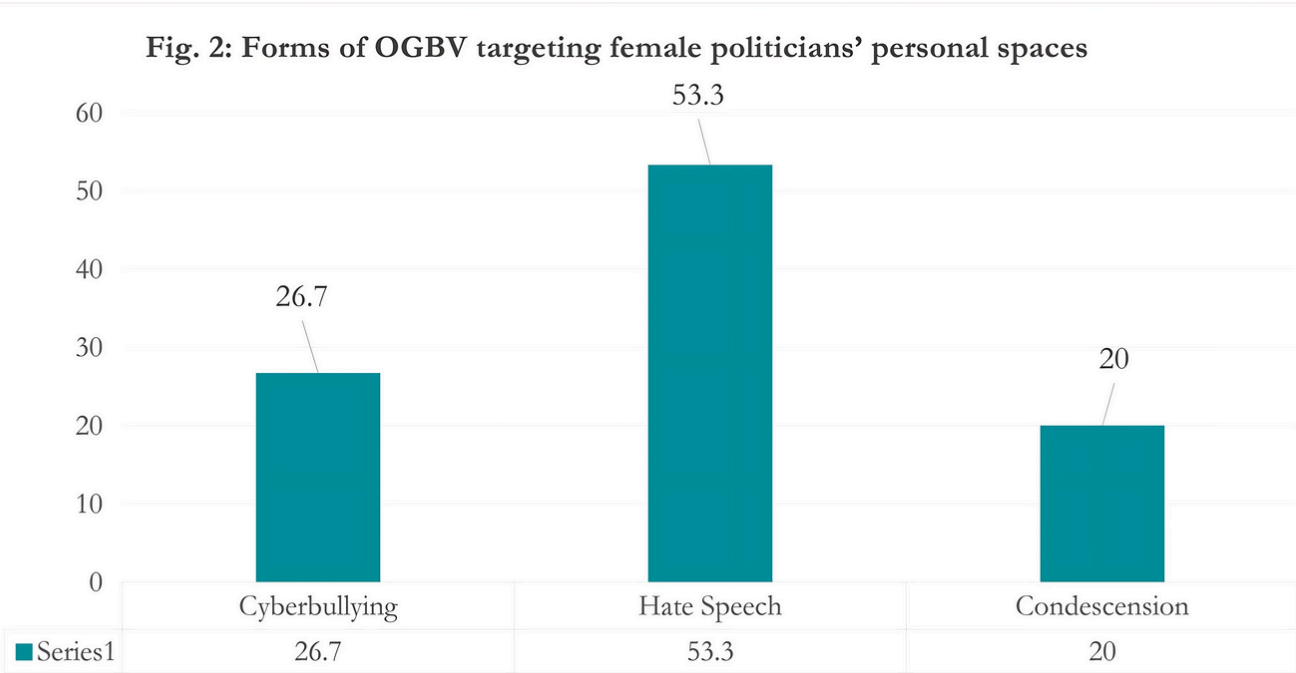
Fig 1: OGBV in comments to FB post?



Of these attacks, the most prevalent form is hate speech which constituted more than half of all the attacks recorded. This involved comments that sought to incite readers to hate or even want to harm the politician. It is followed by comments that attempt to bully the female politicians by harassing or intimidating them [27%]. Together, these two constitute 80 percent of the OGBV content in the comments analysed. One other form of OGBV recorded was condescension (20%) which involves belittling, patronizing and sarcastic comments. Sometimes, it also takes the form of ‘mansplaining’ or talking down to the female politicians or over-explaining

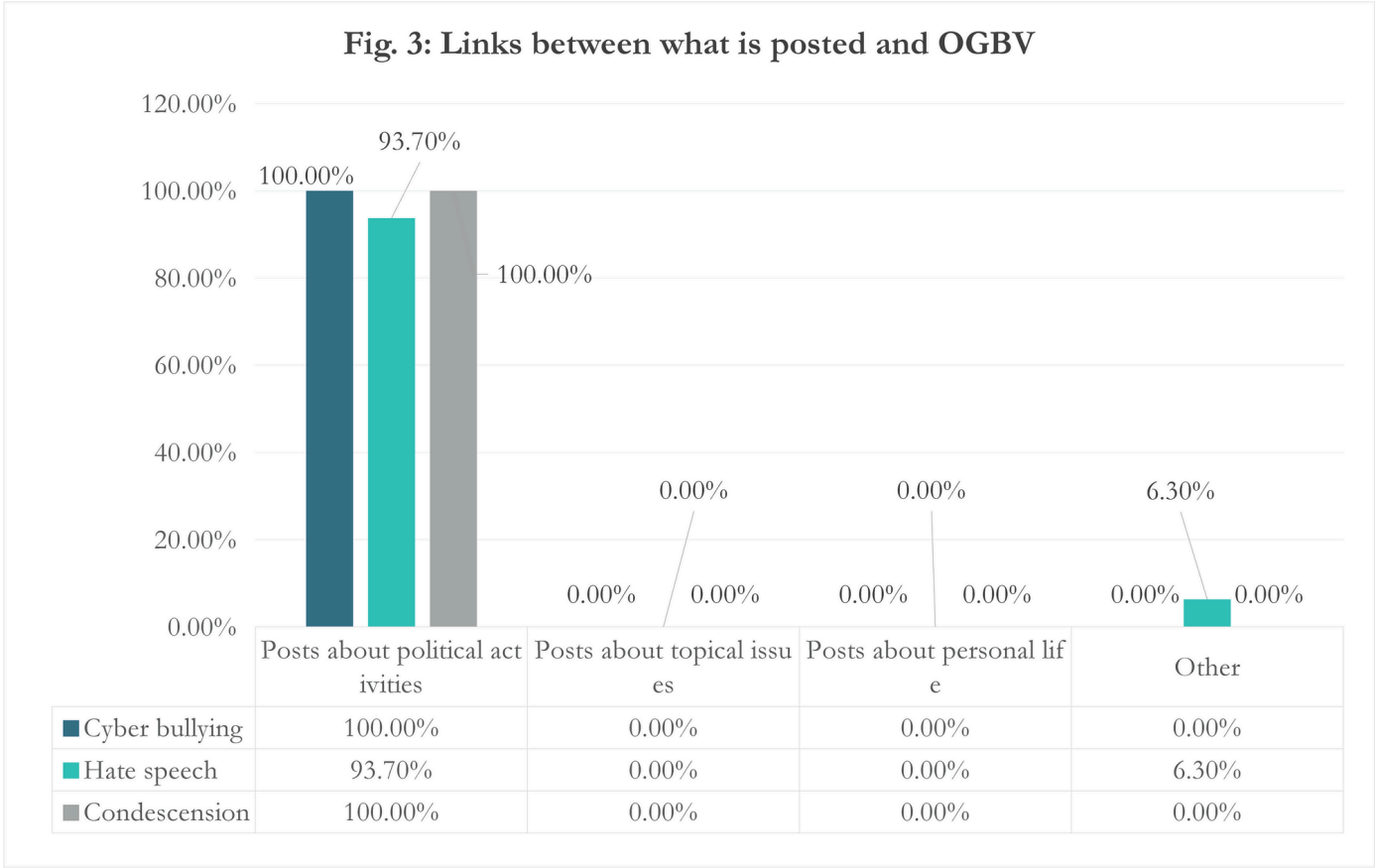
things to them in a manner that suggested that they have inferior reasoning capacity. Other forms of OGBV such as cyber flashing [sending unsolicited sexual images], doxing [sharing the politician’s personal information], sexualised attacks [sexualised language and objectification] were not recorded in the sampled data.

Examples of hate speech included expressions such as "bitchy witchy illiterate," "smelling harlot," and "ugly dark bitch," which not only insulted but also sought to use certain descriptors to invite negative views about the politicians. In the case of cyber bullying, the sampled politicians were on the receiving end of comments such as "I will directly shoot you down" and "Buy Your Coffin on Election Day." These are threats which create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation, undermining the safety and security of female politicians.



OGBV attacks appear to be linked directly to the sharing of information about the political activities of female politicians in these spaces. As the data in Fig. 3 shows, when they post about their personal lives e.g. their family life, old school activities or quotes that inspire them, no OGBV attacks are recorded. In sharp contrast, nearly every instance of OGBV in the comments sampled was linked to the politicians having posted content about their political activities [successes, campaign messages, challenges etc]. Across all three forms of the OGBV recorded,

attacks were occasioned by the politicians sharing about their political activities. This evidence suggests a very worrying possibility – that female participation in politics is deemed a misnomer and therefore, something to be attacked.

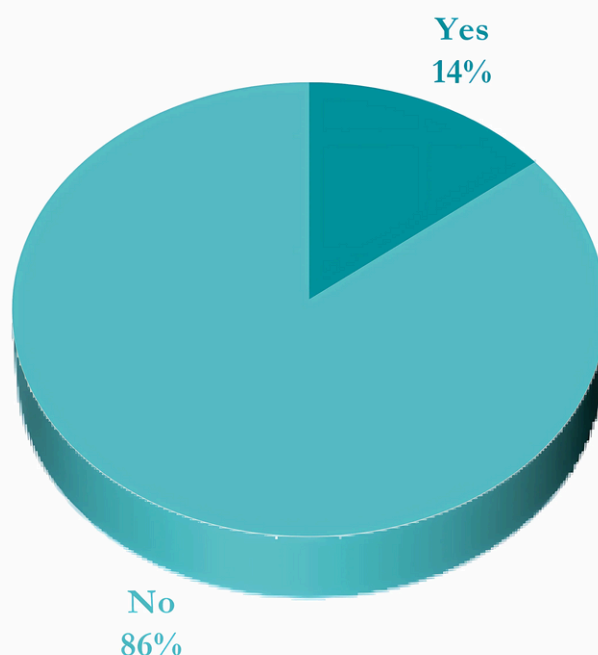


Prevalence of OGBV in online news

Beyond the incidence of OGBV in the personal spaces of female politicians, the study also sought to ascertain its occurrence in online public spaces. An analysis of OGBV presence in online news mentions of the sampled female politicians was used for this purpose.

In the first instance, the study found that female politicians suffer more gendered attacks in online news. In contrast to the seven percent prevalence of OGBV in their personal digital spaces, when it comes to the general news online, this rises to 14 percent (Fig. 4). This means that female politicians are twice as likely to be attacked in online news than they are to be attacked in their personal spaces. This signals that online news is substantially more antagonistic to female politicians. It also signals that online news media is complicit in online gender-based violence.

Fig. 4: Is there evidence of OGBV in the story?



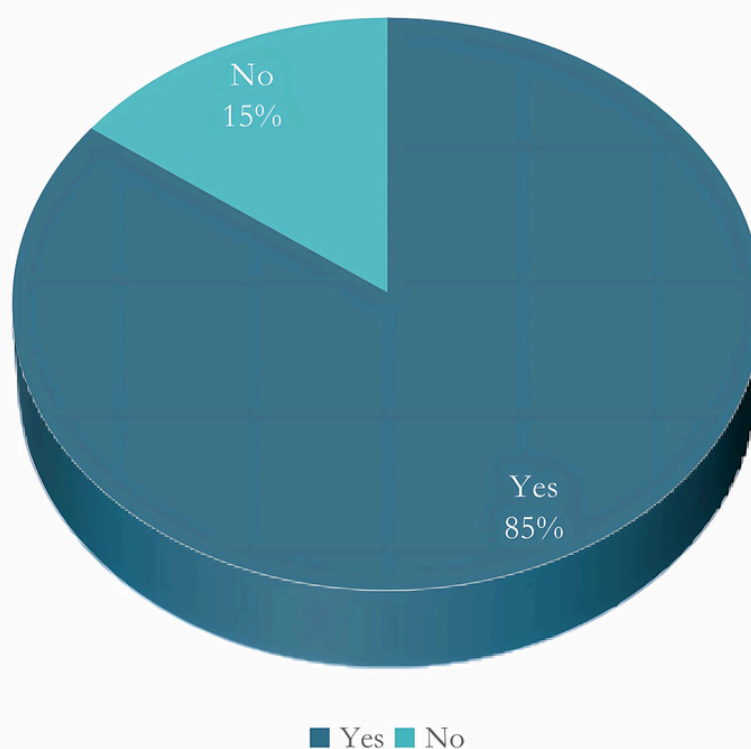
Further evidence of online media complicity comes from the fact that when the news contains OGBV, it is a function of news framing. As Fig. 5 shows, OGBV presence in online news stories is sited in the headlines rather than the body. To the extent that headlines frame the news and invite certain expectations and interpretive lens, this signals clearly that online media feed into OGBV, a situation that is problematic.

Fig. 5: Which part of the story has the OGBV content ?



The possible effects of such negative framing of online news about female politicians in inviting OGBV is evident in Fig. 6 below. As it shows, when comments on online news contain gender-based violence, such attacks can be traced to the substance of the news story. Eighty five percent of OGBV in the comments sections of the online news analysed relate to the substance of the story. In other words, it is the online media that gives the public prompts to attack the female politicians.

Fig. 6: Does the substance of the attacking comment relate to the story?

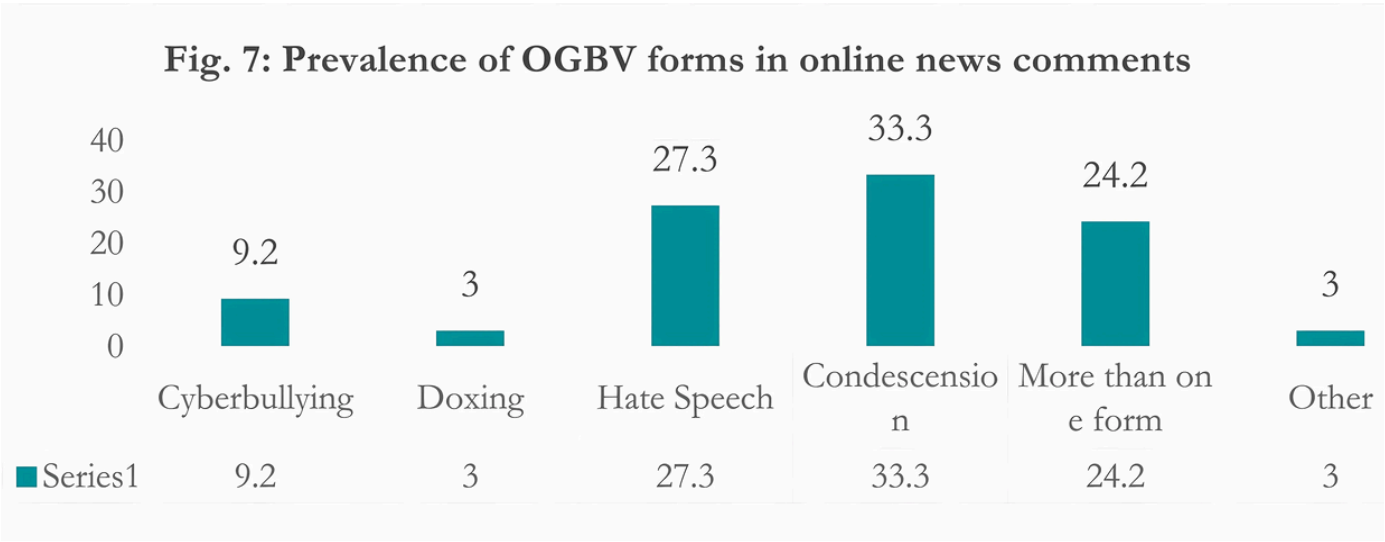


Even more worrying is the extent of OGBV attacks in the public's commentary on online news about female politicians. As Fig. 7 below shows, female politicians suffer significantly more gendered attacks in the comments sections of online news. In contrast to the seven percent prevalence of OGBV in comments on female politicians' personal digital spaces, when it comes to the general online news, this rises to 48 percent. That is 41 percent more! In other words, whereas less than one in ten comments in their personal spaces contain OGBV, when it comes to online news, it is nearly half of every ten stories.

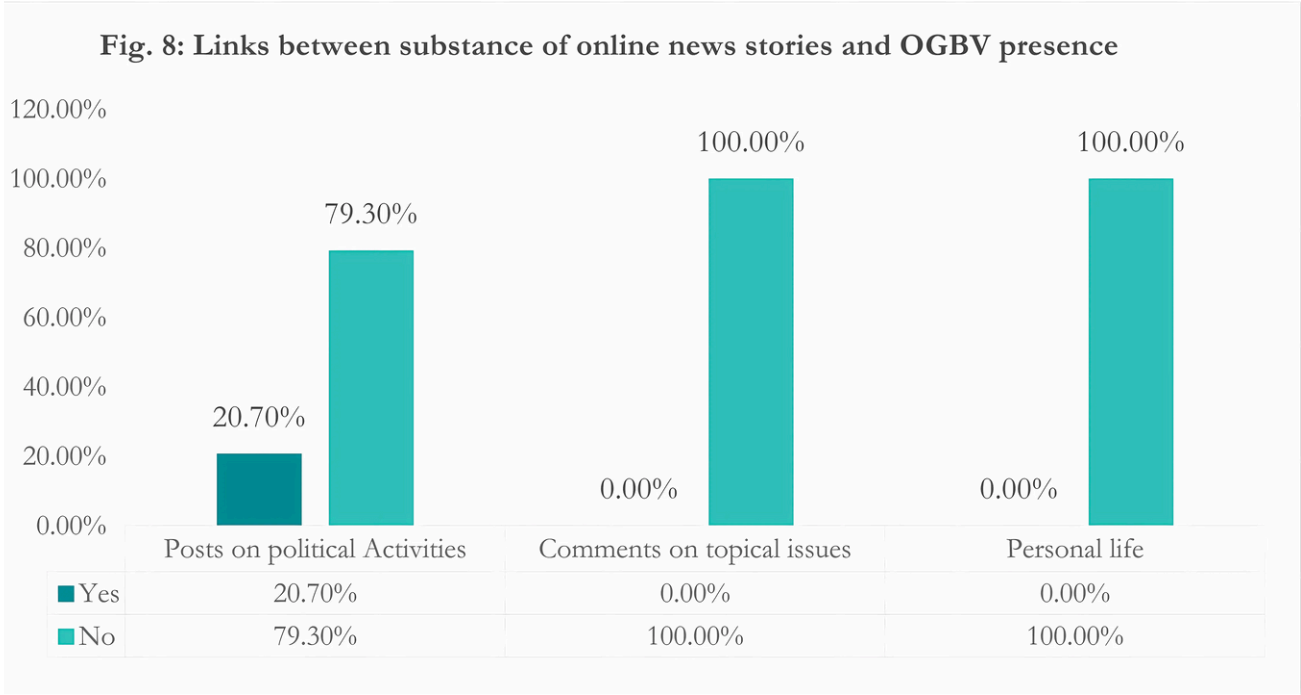
Examples of comments accompanying online news stories that contain OGBV attacks are listed below.

- Dirty and stinking woman
- Very ugly
- No husband
- Big breasted
- Bitchy witchy illiterate
- Smelling harlot daughter of Ashanti
- I will directly shoot you down
- Buy your coffin on election day
- This woman is also a minister in Ghana!
- Uneducated buffoon
- Daughter of murderers
- You killed your husband to inherit him in parliament

Further, the study found that female politicians suffer a wider pool of OGBV attacks in the comments sections of online news than in their personal spaces. In addition to the four forms of OGBV documented from the earlier sample, this study discovered the presence of doxing or the sharing of their private information in public. Further, the study discovered that in a good number of cases more than one form of OGBV is present in online news about the sampled female politicians. The most prevalent form of OGBV observed in the comments section of online news about female politicians is condescension which recorded 16 percent. It is followed, in close proximity, by hate speech (13%) which recorded near-parity.



The study also found that when online news about female politicians contain OGBV, it is more likely than not to be about their political activities. When female politicians comment about topical issues, they appear to be immune to OGBV. The same applies to news about their personal lives. While it is gratifying that female politicians are generally safe when they wade into public discourse and when online news about their life experiences come up, it is worrying that their political activities put them in the direction of OGBV. This further deepens the fear expressed earlier about the Ghanaian society considering women’s participation in politics as a misnomer and, therefore, something to be attacked.



Experiences of OGBV by female politicians in Ghana

The study also explored the lived experiences of female politicians as regards OGBV. Through interviews with a purposively sampled group of six highly visible female politicians, the study explored the forms of attacks they experience, their understanding of what lies at the foundation of these attacks, their coping strategies and response actions as well as their perceptions about how OGBV affects their political lives.

The study found that female politicians experience many types of OGBV, which can be grouped into five main types which interrelate with each other. These are insults and hate speech, manipulation of information, doxing, harassment, and weaponising patriarchy.

Insults and hate speech

The study found that attacks by way of the use of invectives or insulting language are commonplace in the online experiences of female politicians. Insults could take the form of name calling in which uncomplimentary labels are used as descriptors.

I'm going to say it as it is. You are on WhatsApp platform with some young guys that you think that you can give birth to them... He said, 'oh, we are taking back power very soon, by cook or crook'. Then the other one said, 'oh, but the woman is doing very well'. Then the response from that guy was, 'don't ask for that stupid, shameless, incompetent, useless [descriptor referring to interviewee], we don't want you' (FP6).

Here, unfortunately, that is it. So, you don't have a baby, they will use it to insult you. You marry late, they will use it to insult you. You marry and then you broke up... (FP5).

Indeed, such name calling is deemed so widespread that they have assumed normalcy and have come to be expected as part of the terrain for female politics:

And I keep telling the young women that I mentor, that you see, when you get into the club, until they say that you are a witch. It means you haven't really proven your point (FP4).

Insulting attacks could also take the form of body shaming. As recounted by FP4, sometimes, attackers use their body features to disparage female politicians. She cites one attacker who asked "with this my wicked face who would even want me?" (FP5). The excerpts below exemplify this trend of name-calling.

... when the person comes and writes things and describes you as a man woman... I don't have all the curves that women have. But I'm good. And someone starts to describe me as a man woman on Facebook. And you know, those ones hit hard. (FP4).

I didn't want to be using them [social media] that much because of fear of what people would be saying about me. Some will even see your picture, when they see you in person and ask "na yenim se wo ye kɔkɔ, se wo ye tumtum" [we thought you were light skinned. We didn't know you are rather dark skinned] (FP2).

Female politicians also suffer disparaging comments that seek to make them feel less of themselves and invite public disdain towards them.

So, whenever you talk about something, they'll go on with whataboutism, and then, degrade you, or insult you. There are some times that you make a post and then people come under the comment [and say] 'that this is why nobody is going to marry you', or 'this is why you should concentrate on getting married'... they come into your inbox, they will insult you, they will insult your up-bringing, there are people who will tell you that you were not raised well by your parents and that is why you keep talking about these things (FP3).

There are others who come and just, uh, ridicule you, you know. You're putting in a great deal of effort, you think you are doing your best and someone just comes and rubbishes it. That really hurts and it's a put off. Especially, when it's about projects or developmental issues that affect everybody. You know, then you feel that no one is appreciating, even the people you have been working for do not appreciate what you are doing. That can be a setback for women (FP4).

Manipulation of information

Female politicians also encounter attempts to manipulate their information or to use same to misrepresent them. Often, this involves doctored images which seek to misrepresented female politicians and their activities.

You'll be there and a man will send you pictures, nude pictures of women. Sometimes you dress and you come out, and somebody takes that dress, cartoon it in the way the person understands, and send it back to you. Or you'll be there, somebody will send you pornographic material, and post it on your Facebook wall (FP6).

An interviewee recounted a story in which after granting a long TV interview, her sex life became the focus of public discourse, and with it, a doctored image of her.

So, the next two weeks the way people insulted me... And for some reason they went and looked for some picture and photo-shopped it and made me look like some caricature (FP5).

In most cases, however, experiences of information manipulation did not seem to be gendered, albeit having the potential to negatively affect women's participation in politics. Hacking, account cloning etc. are examples of such attempts to manipulate their information and impersonate to deceive and/or defraud their followers and supporters.

And then on Facebook, someone hacked my platform, my Facebook account, and then posted a video of my opponent in my name, telling people that they should rather vote for him... So, my brother and then other guys called like, 'ah, na wo den na wo ye yi?' [but what are you doing?]. You are campaigning for your other contestant'. And I said, no. I went to Facebook and go, see, we went and lo and behold me, I was campaigning for him with this video on the page (FP2).

As recounted in the excerpts below, attempts at manipulating interviewees' information are quite common.

I'll even send you screenshots of people that have used my accounts to impersonate. They will even impersonate you and use your own picture and invite you as a friend on Facebook. They do it unintelligently (FP6).

You know, someone will call me and pose as our national, second national chairman. And ask how the constituency is faring. He has every information about me... So, we made calls to Chairman... and realized that it was fake. So, I don't know whether they tried this on other men or they were you know, picking women because they think we are not very, very familiar or we don't go into technological things that much (FP2).

Harassment

Besides insults and information manipulation, the study also found that female politicians are subjected to harassment in digital spaces. Often, this takes the form of misogyny and sexism.

I would say, they're big-time misogynists. Whenever you make a post about, um, women empowerment, getting women out there, they feel it's an attack to their person, and so in that situation, they will also come at you (FP3).

So, I was the only female. And then somebody would be like, [mentions name of main opponent], that's the MP, "Onhu so na wo?" [even he is not having it easy,

how much more you?]. You understand. “Wo diɛɛ ɛwɔ sɛ wo twɛn” [as for you, you must step aside]..., because the district is not ready for a woman. And these people, you don't know them, they are hiding behind technology to be saying these things to you. (FP2).

At other times, harassment of female politicians in digital spaces takes the form of slut-shaming and a fixation on their sex life. One interviewee recounts the story of a man who accused her of sleeping around:

The man said that I am sleeping with men... I proved to him that it is not true. And I even threatened to take him to court... When I threatened him, he sent people to apologize (FP6).

In other cases, interviewees have been called prostitutes and unable to hold onto their husbands.

...I was a prostitute...Some were saying I was even a gay. I was called different names.... I don't know where they got that from, small boys sleep with me, presidents sleep with me. I slept my way through all the positions (FP5).

Also, female politicians are targets of blatant sexual harassment.

So, whether you have a husband or not, there are certain kinds of men that will want to push you to the wall. One, they will send you pornographic material. Two, they will make advances themselves. Three, if they fail that, then they will begin to attack you online (FP6).

Weaponising patriarchy

The study also found that female politicians suffer attacks by way of attempts by members of the public to use patriarchal expectations of women against them. Varied expectations of women in patriarchal societies are used as prompts to question the legitimacy of females as bona fide political agents.

There are some times that you make a post and then people come under the comment that this is why nobody is going to marry you, or this is why you should concentrate on getting married [instead of being in politics (FP3).

Doxing

Another form of OGBV encountered by female politicians in Ghana is doxing which involves the sharing of personal or private information without the consent, often with negative intentions.

And one time, I had someone posting where I live, like exactly where I live, where my house is. And, um, yes, I think that is the most extreme I've seen anybody go when it comes to being attacked online (FP3).

Clearly, female politicians in Ghana are forced to negotiate their ways around varied forms of OGBV. The next section seeks to explore the roots of these attacks and their implications for the lives and works of female politicians.

Causes of OGBV attacks on female politicians

The study's exploration of what lies at the root of OGBV against female politicians relied on interviewee's experiences and conceptualisations of the reasons for, and circumstances surrounding the attacks. Five primary factors were adduced as the foundation for OGBV attacks against female politicians. These are patriarchy, vendetta, gender-based competition, the anonymity and freedom affordances of the internet, and the nature of Ghanaian politics. Below, these are explained.

Patriarchy

At the root of online gender-based attacks is patriarchy and the narrow room it gives for women's leadership and public presence. Culturally-held notions about women's roles in society and what is permissible to them are fundamental to online gender-based attacks against female politicians. As it appears, their participation in the public sphere of national politics is deemed a misnomer for some Ghanaians who see women as belonging within domestic circles.

It's the cultural setting of this country that makes it worrying. If you go to other countries, there are [female] MPs everywhere. They don't attack their personalities. At a point, it was assumed that women are supposed to be behind. And that men sit on the table and make decisions for us. But it has come to the point where women are asking that 'look, let us also be part of the decision making. (FP6).

It's our society. Our society is patriarchal. Its male-dominated not just in presence, but in stature. The males dominate our political space (FP5).

OGBV is also framed by cultural expectations of women's sexuality. Expectations of sexual piety by women¹⁸ is often the bases of insults against female politicians, as recounted by this interviewee: Culture also lies at the root of expectations about women's sexuality, which is often the basis of OGBV. Expectations of women's chastity intersect with expectations that they be confined to the private sphere. For this reason, women in active politics are deemed to have flouted sexual piety expectations¹⁹.

'They don't insult our poverty. And yet a lot of women are poor... I know women who are alcoholics, but it's not something they use to insult women because people don't care anyway, you know. The only thing they always use is sex that's it (FP5).

Gender-based competition

There is also what appears to be a turf war between males and females which fuels OGBV. Given historical confinement of women to the private sphere, it appears that their inroads into the public sphere and politics in general is deemed a threat to some men.

So, apart from the fact that the numbers overwhelm us when we go into the political space, it is that ego. It is that machismo in them that dominates them and wants them to be rather than us (FP5).

It appears that females venturing into politics is seen by some as an attempt to snatch opportunities that should be the preserve of males.

... [there] are men who think that you have intruded into their domain... They agree that there are certain areas that are reserved for men. And therefore, as a woman, you have intruded into that space. And they will commission people to do that (FP6).

For some reason, whenever you make posts about getting more women in power and all those stuff, people just assume that you want men and women to compete, and so they take it from that angle, and so they attack you from that particular angle (FP3).

18 Atobrah, D., & Awedoba, A. K. (2017). Men play, women break the town: gender and intergenerational asymmetry in sexual and reproductive Worldview among the GA of Ghana. *Sexuality & Culture*, 21, 860-881.

19 Munemo, P. (2017). Women's participation in decision making in public and Political Spheres in Ghana: constraints and strategies. *Journal of Culture, Society and Development*, 37, 47-52.

Parochial interests and Vendetta

The internet, unfortunately, has assumed prominence as a place for settling scores. From revenge porn to disinformation, the internet offers individuals a public space by which to wage wars against those they consider to have wronged them. The study shows that this affordance of the internet, and social media in particular, sometimes lies at the root of OGBV. Whether it be to settle scores from unsuccessful romantic advances, or from unfulfilled requests made to the politicians, it is evident from the interviews that some individuals take advantage of the huge social media audiences to settle personal scores.

There are some categories of youth that, when you are an MP, they have parochial interests. And if you are not able [to satisfy them], because they are most frequently on the internet, if you are not able to meet those their personal demands, they will attack you. And people will not understand. They don't understand that, 'oh, it is because they have personal interest'. Because they won't explain to the people that, 'oh, it's because of personal interest' (FP6).

I mean, generally you find some woman making an effort and then maybe she wants to share her experience, she wants to share. And then the attack [comes]. Sometimes, when you read through... what they are saying, you can know when it's a personal attack... sometimes you can gauge from looking at what is said that, no, clearly there's some relationship and there's somebody trying to settle a score on social media (FP4).

Online freedom and anonymity

Another reason that appears to drive OGBV against female politicians lies in the characteristic affordances of the internet and social media. Here, reference is made to the freedom and anonymity that the internet can afford users which can be exploited for negative purposes.

... the internet and the social media, uh, users benefit from the anonymity; that no one knows who you are; and so you can go there and say anything (FP4).

The internet or the digital space has created a lot of open gaps for people to enter. For instance, if I'm not on Facebook, you cannot attack me (FP 6)

The impersonal nature of the internet, coupled with the opportunity to mask one's identity online suggests that often, people feel emboldened to attack female politicians in a manner they otherwise could not do if engaging with them in-person.

We are just online. And you know how the online anonymity gives people this boldness that they don't generally have. So if you show them that Look, you are just a coward and you're hiding behind your keyboard to be writing nonsense... Honestly, I've come to realize that most of these people are just cowards. They will do this because it's online, but when they are to meet you face to face, they cannot match that same energy (FP3).

The nature of Ghanaian politics

The study discovered, disturbingly, that factors relating to the nature of Ghanaian politics fuels OGBV against female politicians. The sharply divided political scene in Ghana engenders a lot of acrimony between followers of the two main political parties [the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress]. Given the reach of social media platforms, they are frequently used as battlegrounds for political debates which may degenerate into abusive behaviour in the attempt to silence opposing voices. The implication is that female politicians attract vitriolic attacks from followers of their political opponents.

... the first being party foot soldiers. Whenever you make a post that kind of goes against their particular party that they align with, they will come at you with all that they have (FP 3).

So, I preferred using, only pro NPP platform in the district. Alright, because on that platform you know most of them. But the general one that was a combination of the NDC and other things, I didn't want to be using them that much because of fear of what people would be saying about me (FP2).

Clearly, OGBV against female politicians arise from political disdain, fuelled by partisan divides and oppositional politics.

I had to supply water to one of the second cycle institutions... And so I put it there [Facebook]. Someone from the opposite side of our politics, my brother from the [mentions party name] will come and say, 'oh [addresses politician], you should do more, you haven't done anything. Useless' (FP4).

It was because I started doing politics... So, everyone will know that you are from this side and you are doing this. I had a Facebook account before. I used to share my things, pictures about me. I have one for my foundation. I share things about women, and the comments are not bad. But because this one is on political basis. I believe that was the reason a few attacks that I had were coming (FP2).

Perpetrators of OGBV against female politicians

Across the factors identified as driving OGBV against female politicians, different perpetrators were found. For the most part, it appears that responsibility for OGBV is gendered. Perpetrators are mostly males who are politically opposed to the female politicians, or anxious about losing their societal privileges to women.

There were men. Men. I didn't see any comment from a female. Yeah. So, I believe they were saying these things to me because I'm a female (FP2).

Those who are perpetrating gender-based violence are men who think that you have intruded into their domain. They agree that there are certain areas that are reserved for men. And therefore, as a woman, you have intruded into that space. And they will commission people to do that (FP6)

It was also discovered that females are sometimes culprits of OGBV against female politicians.

Even your own females... Because there's a lady, I don't know if maybe I've met her, but I don't know her like this one on one. She was all over 'whatsapping' people telling them that she has sex tape on me... (FP5).

In some instances too, it appears that OGBV is an inadvertent commission by less media savvy people, or persons with poor language competency.

There are others who will come genuinely to try and maybe either criticize an effort or an activity. But, their choice of language, because they probably don't have the training that you and I have, they just come and spew out anything and some of the words they use, some of the sentences can be very offensive (FP4).

Implications of OGBV against female politicians

Irrespective of what lies at the root of OGBV against female politicians, the fact that it portends negative consequences is what calls for urgent attention to addressing it. Interviewees' accounts demonstrate that OGBV has several negative consequences. These include forced self-censorship, emotional distress, reduced impact and opportunities, and acquiescence. This makes OGBV highly toxic for women's participation in national politics.

Forced Self-censorship

One of the dangerous implications of OGBV against female politicians is the curtailment of their free speech. OGBV engenders a culture of silence among female politicians. This is because they define their voice expression in digital spaces as attracting OGBV for which reason 'shutting up' becomes a viable solution.

I wasn't comfortable because of the comments that people were making, so I, wasn't using social media, especially Facebook because of the few encounters that I had... And that was the more reason why I wasn't posting as I had wanted to, especially on Facebook (FP2).

As the interview excerpt below shows, often OGBV forces female politicians to either be less forceful in their voice expression or to stay away from it altogether.

About a year ago, it got so bad that whenever a thought occurs to me and I want to make a post about it I'll write it in my notes and then later, I share it on my Facebook wall. But there are sometimes that I'll see it and then I'll read and I'm like 'nah, this one people will just come at me. So let me just delete it'. So there was a point that I became a little bit, what's the word to use? not posting too much because I felt 'well, let me just keep some of these things to myself' (FP3).

In addition, OGBV-induced self-censorship manifests as female politicians choosing to stay away from controversial issues.

Normally, topical issues, I don't go into controversy. I, when I see something that is controversial, I won't go into it. I don't normally like meddling in them (FP5).

Emotional distress

OGBV also results in emotional distress. As can be seen from the excerpts below, OGBV can have significant consequences for the emotional wellbeing of female politicians.

I did not attack them. I did not retaliate. I just ignored. But emotionally I was affected. I wasn't happy. I was down. And that was the more reason why I wasn't posting as I had wanted to especially on Facebook (FP2).

While politics in Ghana remains a tough space to venture into, the vitriol it exposes female politicians to can be very hurtful, causing emotional pain to them.

... as a person, yes, I'm human to be hurt because you can't imagine your own son, the guy who insulted me is just about two or three years older than my first child... So, if your own child can insult you up to a good level, it hurts. It hurts (FP6).

You know, you think that it's politics. But when the person comes and writes things and describes you as a man-woman... [describes her own features here]. And you know, those ones hit hard (FP4).

Acquiescence

OGBV also normalises the ills of Ghana's political scene, forcing female politicians to acquiesce to them. Frequent experiences of OGBV normalises it in the eyes of female politicians and leads them to internalise it as part of the political culture.

The day they say that you are witch, you know that you are making a mark, you know? Yes, they think that they are getting at you. But look at it, flip it and say, look, you know, these guys are really getting what I wanted....

In other words, OGBV becomes something they must learn to live with rather than fight.

... until they say you are a witch; you are actually not doing the job well. So, in a way, it sort of calms the nerves, even when these things are happening that, well, it means that I'm touching on some nerves. People are seeing what I am doing (FP4).

Reduced impact and opportunities

Altogether, one of the biggest threat that OGBV poses to female politicians is the shrinking of their impact and opportunities.

... I felt 'well, let me just keep some of these things to myself'. But I had an experience where I met someone. The person told me that, 'you know, in as much as people are going to hit on you for the things that you post, there are people who also like the things that you post. There are people who will be helped through the things that you post. There are people who feel heard through the things that you post and so you must not allow the bullies to get you. Yes, it did affect me.

This draws from the intersection of the implications outlined above. For instance, self-censorship, emotional distress and acquiescence mean that female politicians lose the opportunity to make themselves known and heard, which can cost them in political dividends by way of voter support and political appointments. Politics is a difficult space for women to enter on any day. With OGBV, it becomes an even more challenging space to make meaningful impacts and attract opportunities through them.

I ever met someone who said, 'you started well. I will see you flying all over. It's when I got to know that we were protesting, but you know, I don't see it anymore, so I chose [mentions opponent's name]'. So that really affected how far I could have gone on social media. I could have reached a lot of people, but I stopped. I was discouraged (FP2).

Coping and response strategies for OGBV

Researchers have documented a number of responses individuals resort to when they are confronted with OGBV²⁰. Some of the response options are exploited by victims to cope with the situation while others aim to prevent its recurrence. These include reporting the abuse, seeking help from rights-based organisations, seeking legal redress, changing their privacy settings, etc.

This study found that interviewees use several strategies to cope with and address OGBV. These include self-censorship, acquiescing, developing resilience, digital

20 Athirah, S., & Hidayana, I. M. Women's Agency and Resistance to Cyber Flashing on Twitter. Masyarakat, Jurnal Sosiologi, 28(1), The-advance.

detoxing, limiting direct engagements, retaliation, reporting, deleting and blocking, education, relying on supporters, and turning the tables. These can be grouped into two main blocs - avoidance tactics and action measures. Below, the avoidance tactics used are described.

Self-censorship

As indicated earlier, interviewees sometimes resort to self-censorship in order to avoid the toxicity of OGBV. They do this by avoiding issues deemed controversial, and by ensuring that their activities on social media are not controversial. As FP5 noted, to avoid OGBV, “we should avoid unnecessary controversies”. As it appears, while interviewees choose to stay in digital spaces in order not to miss out on things, the prevalence of OGBV forces them to keep quiet.

Getting off it doesn't solve the problem. I stay on it. I don't comment. I don't say anything. But I watch what everybody's saying (FP4).

I wasn't comfortable because of the comments that people were making, so I, wasn't using social media, especially Facebook because of the few encounters that I had.

Acquiescence and resilience

Another means by which female politicians navigate OGBV targeting them is by acquiescing and ignoring. It appears that some female politicians have made peace with the fact that OGBV comes with the terrain.

And whilst you do all that, also know that no matter how good you are, no matter how best you perform, they'll still come at you because you're female. They'll still come at you. They'll look for something to tag you with. They'll bully you and once you are aware that ‘this is a hazard that will come with what I am doing’, you are not afraid. You are well prepared for it... Take it in your stride (FP5).

In other words, OGBV has normalised to a point where interviewees have learnt to accept it rather than confront it.

We should learn to endure also. We've come into the terrain and that, unfortunately, is a tough game so we are putting our foot in there... Nobody's going to make it any easier for us (FP1).

What women should understand is that when it comes to using social media, it is the fact that you putting yourself out there and people opposing your views does not change... You are going to have people who are not going to be okay with it, no matter what you do with it. That is the problem. So if you are coming online to push a particular agenda, push a particular political agenda, do it, do it knowing that it is the right thing to do. (FP3).

Besides learning to accept it as normal, interviewees also cope with OGBV by developing a thick skin

No matter, you should be ready for it. And then, find ways to deal with them. Yes, instead of withdrawing, as I did, which I think wasn't the best. Because whether you like it or not, social media is here to stay and you have to use it (FP2).

We the female parliamentarians ourselves... should begin to take charge of ourselves. For instance, don't let whatever they put there get into your head. Stand on your ground (FP5).

As one interviewee advises, once they win an election, female politicians must should toughen up (FP1).

Digital detoxing

The study also found that to deal with the avalanche of OGBV targeting them, female politicians sometimes take a break from the cyber space. This allows them to catch their breath before returning to partake in activities in the space.

It affected me a lot. I went offline because at a point I felt, they'll tell you like posting too much, you talk too much, you're always going on and on and on about women issues (FP3).

Besides attempts to avoid OGBV, the study also found that a number of coping and response strategies tend to be more proactive. These are described below.

Retaliation

Female politicians sometimes resort to a 'boot for boot' approach to counter OGBV. According to some of the interviewees, the only means to stop OGBV perpetrators is by serving them a dose of their own bitter pill.

Sometimes when I meet women, I communicate this to them. Don't let this violence get into your head. They are also human beings... If they insult you this way, please respond in the same measure to them. They will also feel the heat. Don't go back into your house and say, I won't do politics because of somebody (FP6).

I see what happens to other women and it cows them and they can't even fight back and they can't talk. I mean, if you call me out and you say something that I don't like, I'm going to come after you and make my case (FP1).

From the excerpt below, it would appear that this strategy is sometimes effective in quieting OGBV attackers.

... for a while I played the ignore game. Whenever I make a post, you have people come make demeaning comments... and then I'll just ignore. But I realized that it was increasing. And so I had to take things into my own hand. And so when you come at me, I will not ignore. I'll give it to you back to back. Then I realized that that kind of measured it a little bit... Because if you, if you don't put a stop to it, there's no way that they will just vanish (FP3).

Deleting, blocking and setting ground rules

The study also found that female politicians delete unwanted comments under their posts, and also block attackers.

Sometimes you see a comment and fortunately you have the opportunity to delete comments that you don't want to be on your page...

...And then in the end, I may have to block the person so that the person will not have the opportunity to come to my space to continue with what they are doing (FP3).

Sometimes, this gatekeeping strategy is also to ensure that their personal spaces and posts are not used as avenues for attacking other persons.

But it's rather when you come to attack somebody under my post, then I will delete it. Especially when the person is a political person. Like, I write something and you come and insult Bawumia or you come and insult Nana or you come and insult John Mahama or you come and insult any of our political leaders under my post, I will delete it and block it (FP5).

Sometimes, female politicians also resort to setting rules of engagement for their pages. The idea is to proactively nurture decorum in discourses within their spaces.

On Facebook, for example, on my page, once in a while, I come and put on the page, this is my palace. Watch your language before you come and make a comment. I issue those kinds of statements often (FP1).

Reporting

Besides retaliation, the study also found that female politicians also resort to reporting attacks to relevant authorities. In some cases, reports are made to the social media platforms to seek redress. In others, reports are made to security agencies. For instance, FP 5 recounts reporting an attacker to the National Intelligence Bureau. Such reports, it appears, are made when attackers overwhelm the interviewees.

If I think this particular person is being a little bit too much, sometimes I, I will report them to Facebook (FP3). However, the reporting or blocking of perpetrators is not always effective. On the one hand, perpetrators can always change their identities and set up new accounts to attack their targets, including female politicians.

Well, you may prevent them from having access to your space, but this is Facebook, they can just create another page and then have access to your space again, as long as you've made your account public. They can create another page or use a different account and get back to you, but, well, sometimes that is what I do.

On the other hand, deleting comments can be misconstrued as the politician being undemocratic or cowardly. As explained by one interviewee, “if you attack me and I delete you, you will think I'm a coward.”

Education

The study found that female politicians use education and sensitisation to counter OGBV. Seeing OGBV as coming from a place of ignorance and misinformation, some interviewees indicated that they sometimes take the opportunity to educate attackers and others who might share in their perspectives.

But, personally, I don't like deleting people's comments because I have this belief that the person making that comment is not the only one with that opinion. And so, the person makes the comment and I school the person under that particular comment. If there's a need for me to explain. I do that. (FP3).

If it is something that has to do with my political career and is targeted at bringing my image down, I will respond in a way that next time you won't do it. Like, for instance, the guy who posted 'shameless, useless, incompetent [descriptor], I responded and told the person that, oh my son, if you insult your own mother like this, what do you expect others to do? I hope it was a mistake and you won't do it again. The person has not done it (FP6).

Relying on support networks

The study also found that female politicians rely on their supporters to address challenges posed by OGBV.

You know, coming after me, if there are fake accounts and faceless people, who may say something on my page, I don't even have to respond. You try to see how people will come and fight you for me. (FP1).

And I will not reply them, I wasn't replying, but I had people, some guys who will stand up for me. I remember one time someone posted that, 'vote for my sister. This is my sister. She's a good candidate. She's the only one that can save the district. We've tried the men over the years. So, this time around, let's send a mother who will come and support us' (FP2).

Besides relying on support networks to respond directly to OGBV attackers, female politicians also reported the need to be surrounded by a network of constructively critical voices to call them [interviewees] to order if need be.

You need to have people that you talk to in regards to your social media activities, because there are some times that you make a post and you are wrong. You need to have people... in your circle who are going to be very honest and critical and they will tell you that this particular thing that you did, this particular post that you made is wrong. So, if there's a need to take it down, you do. If there's a need to apologize, you apologize (FP3).

Turning the tables

The study found that sometimes the coping strategy used by female politicians to counter OGBV is by turning the tables on their attackers. Here, they respond to attacking comments with positive or comic responses aimed at reducing tensions. Sometimes, you know, my boys, campaign handlers, they get excited and they want to jab someone... I tell them no. Sometimes it's not necessary. Look at what the person has said. Send him an image of laughter. He won't come back. Send him even a poetry. (FP4).

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings warrant a number of conclusions that are both worrying, in most regards, but also encouraging in others. The key conclusions drawn for the study are listed below.

- Public commentary on online news about female politicians is the worst avenue for OGBV both in terms of prevalence and scope of attacks.
- Online news media are complicit in OGBV; online news records more OGBV attacks against female politicians compared to the female politicians' personal posts and commentary in online spaces.
- Attacks on female politicians comprise a complex mix of hate speech, information manipulation, harassment, cyber bullying, condescension, non-consensual sharing of private information.
- OGBV attacks are more likely than not to be occasioned by stories about the political activities of female politicians, suggesting the chilling possibility that female participation in politics is deemed a misnomer and, therefore, something to be attacked.
- At the root of OGBV against female politicians lie several drivers, including patriarchy, male perceptions of competition with women, vendetta, freedom and anonymity enjoyed by online users, and the nature of Ghana's politics.
- OGBV against female politicians is perpetrated by both males and females with the former being guiltier.
- Besides being gendered, perpetrators of OGBV are generally political opponents, or anti male-female equality.
- OGBV is very costly to female politicians, forcing them to self-censor, acquiesce to problematic norms or miss out on opportunities.
- To address these negative effects of OGBV, female politicians resort to digital detoxing, retaliation, reduced direct engagements online, deleting and blocking, reporting and public education.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that digital spaces are quite toxic for female politicians, posing as avenues for bullying, hate speech, misogyny, harassment and several other forms of OGBV. This is neither unique to Ghana nor evidence of an isolated case. Research published by UN Women in 2022 shows that the evidence found replicates that in several other countries where women with a public voice are known to be widely targeted by OGBV¹⁵.

Concerningly, OGBV attacks extend beyond public digital spaces such as online news portals to the personal social media pages of female politicians. Even more concerning is the fact that online news media are complicit in OGBV. This evidence is not new, as it validates earlier reports on media representations of female politicians²¹. While comments sections of online news portals present the most OGBV, a clear connection with the framing of stories suggests that the media primes the audience to attack female politicians by their reports and news angles. Previous research points to social media platforms as being complicit in OGBV²². From this study we see that the lens must extend to the news media too. We need to closely examine their news framing practices that engender OGBV.

While this is worrying in its occurrence, it does present opportunity for reducing OGBV. A more conscious media and gender-sensitive reporting of female politicians that avoid OGBV framing can be used to engineer low incidence of OGBV. If story framing drives OGBV in the audience comments, then coverage of female politicians that is devoid of frames that invite attacks should see fewer attacks. The power of conscious media in addressing gender-based violence has been documented in existing research²³. Accordingly, it is recommended that more training on gender sensitive reporting be targeted at online news portals, bloggers, local media, particularly those reporting political beats in which they might cover stories about female politicians.

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22 7: Algorithmic Bias in Digital Space: Twitter's Complicity in Gender-Based Violence in: *Geographies of Gender-based Violence* (bristoluniversitypressdigital.com)

23 <https://srhr.dspace-express.com/server/api/core/bitstreams/e8752776-4ff9-47ba-84f1-7541a102c9c7/>
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signals the worrying fact that female participation in politics is deemed a misnomer; something that should be quelled, hence the attacks. While Ghana's patriarchal history and orientation means that women's involvement in politics have hardly been recognised, it is worrying that in the contemporary democratic space, women should suffer such vilification for their civic participation, a legitimate right under the constitution. Civil society, the Electoral Commission, the National Commission for Civic Education and the media, all owe a responsibility and must endeavour to conduct wider civic education to encourage tolerance for female participation in politics.


Besides this, advocacy must target getting political parties to commit to internal affirmative action to improve the presence and status of females in their hierarchies. Advocacy should also secure commitments from political parties to train their leaders, opinion leaders and communication team members to project tolerance for women's presence in politics, and a no-tolerance stance for OGBV. As the study found, OGBV portends very negative consequences for female politicians. Besides the emotional trauma and the chilling out of their voices, OGBV limits women's readiness to enter, and opportunities to grow in politics. This presents a vicious cycle where women in politics are too few to become a norm, and therefore continue to be seen as an aberration and attacked. The finding, therefore, calls for stronger commitment to achieving parity in politics and governance. Years of unfulfilled political promises of improving female representation and participation in politics and governance have demonstrated the lack of political will towards achieving such parity. Indeed, the slow pace of promulgation of the affirmative action bill is a testament to this, and an indictment on the nation. Accordingly, it is recommended that advocacy deepens towards securing the passage of the Affirmative Action Bill to improve the count and impact of women in politics.

Beyond this, a more deliberate effort by state agencies such as the security services, the judiciary and the Cyber Security Authority to bring justice to OGBV victims should help set the tone for a no-tolerance stance in the country. Thus, training and advocacy should target these agencies of the state to make them

more sensitive towards, and proactive in the fight to reduce OGBV, generally, and against female politicians in particular.

As noted, there is a silver lining to this grim picture of OGBV against female politicians; female politicians do not take OGBV lying down. In a manner similar to strategies used by victims elsewhere¹⁵, they have evolved coping strategies and response actions that enable them to navigate OGBV. Whether through digital detoxing, retaliation, reduced direct engagements online, deleting and blocking, reporting and public education, female politicians take steps to protect themselves from, actively fight or strive to prevent recurrence of OGBV attacks. These strategies can be fine-tuned and used as framework for training other female politicians, particularly new entrants to empower them to effectively navigate OGBV without being pushed down by it. Training on effective social media skills, OGBV awareness, media and information literacy and strategies for countering OGBV should serve female politicians well and position them in good stead to navigate the challenge as they seek to expand their reach and impact through digital spaces.

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