



Gendered Digital Harassment of Tanzanian Female Members of Parliament on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Digital harassment has emerged as a significant form of gendered political violence that constrains women's participation in democratic processes. This article refines and strengthens insights drawn from an existing qualitative research report that examined digital harassment directed at female Members of Parliament (MPs) in Tanzania on Instagram. Guided by Feminist Standpoint Theory, the study conceptualises online harassment as a gendered extension of offline power relations reproduced through platform affordances and socio-political norms. Using qualitative content analysis of Instagram comments and interpretive insights from the original research, the paper analyses the dominant forms of harassment, the structural and platform-related drivers that sustain it, and the implications for women's political participation. The findings show that harassment is systematic rather than incidental, manifesting through performance-based abusive criticism, personal insults, political misogyny, sexualised commentary, and delegitimising attacks. These practices are reinforced by patriarchal norms, political polarisation, anonymity, misinformation, and weak platform and legal responses. The article strengthens the analytical contribution of the original report by situating the findings more firmly within feminist and political communication scholarship and by clarifying their theoretical, practical, and policy relevance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have become central to contemporary political communication, reshaping how political actors engage with citizens, construct public personas, and participate in democratic deliberation. Social media platforms enable political leaders to bypass traditional media gatekeeping, mobilise supporters, and sustain continuous interaction with the public (Cotter & Savage, 2019; Mutsvairo & Karam, 2021). However, a growing body of scholarship demonstrates that these platforms are not neutral arenas of participation. Instead, they often function as spaces where existing social inequalities—particularly gendered power relations—are reproduced and intensified (Jane, 2021; Sobieraj, 2020).

Globally, research consistently shows that women in politics experience disproportionate levels of online harassment compared to their male counterparts, with abuse frequently characterised by misogyny, sexualisation, threats, and delegitimising discourse (Krook, 2020; Krook & Restrepo Sanin, 2020; Amnesty International, 2021). Such harassment operates as a form of gendered political violence that shifts political debate away from policy substance toward women's bodies, morality, and perceived legitimacy. Studies by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2021) and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA, 2021) further demonstrate that sustained exposure to online abuse contributes to self-censorship, psychological distress, and reduced willingness among women to seek or remain in political office, thereby undermining democratic representation.

Within African political contexts, digital harassment against women politicians is shaped by the intersection of patriarchal socio-cultural norms, political competition, and weak regulatory environments. Empirical studies from Kenya, Nigeria, and Southern Africa show that online abuse is frequently mobilised during periods of heightened political contestation and elections as a strategy to intimidate, silence, or discredit women leaders (Salawu, 2021; Mutheu & Baatiema, 2022; Mutsvairo & Karam, 2021). Respectability politics and moral expectations play a particularly significant role, with women leaders judged against rigid standards of femininity that are rarely applied to men (Lukalo & Ombati, 2021; Nyabola, 2020).

In Tanzania, the expansion of social media use among political actors has coincided with growing concern over online hostility and gender-based abuse. Women Members of Parliament have increasingly adopted platforms such as Instagram to communicate with constituents, promote legislative work, and enhance political visibility (Mashauri & Khamis, 2022). However, existing evidence indicates that Tanzanian women in public life are disproportionately targeted by online harassment that focuses on their appearance, morality, and personal lives rather than their political performance (Mtega & Lwoga, 2021; Mwakagenda, 2024). Although Tanzania has legal provisions addressing cyber-related offences, including the Cybercrimes Act of 2015, enforcement remains

inconsistent, and digital harassment is rarely recognised or treated as a form of gendered political violence (Maliganya & Kalinga, 2023; Mwakagenda, 2024).

Instagram warrants particular scholarly attention in the Tanzanian context due to its visual orientation and emphasis on personal imagery, which intensifies objectification and moral policing of women in public life (Soriano, 2022; UN Women, 2024). Visual scrutiny on Instagram frequently blurs boundaries between public leadership and private identity, exposing female politicians to heightened surveillance and gendered judgement. Despite these dynamics, platform-specific analyses of digital harassment against Tanzanian female Members of Parliament remain limited. Building on an existing qualitative research report, this article strengthens and contextualises empirical findings on Instagram-based harassment by situating them within feminist theory and broader debates on gender, power, and digital political communication.

Statement of the Problem

While the prevalence of digital harassment against women politicians is increasingly recognised, existing analyses in Tanzania remain limited in theoretical depth and analytical integration. Findings from empirical research reports are often presented descriptively, without sufficiently linking observed patterns of harassment to broader feminist theories of power, political communication, and platform governance. As a result, the structural nature of digital harassment as gendered political violence remains under-theorised, limiting the usefulness of such studies for policy, institutional reform, and scholarly debate.

Research Objectives

- i. To clarify and strengthen understanding of the dominant forms of digital harassment targeting female Members of Parliament in Tanzania.
- ii. To refine analysis of the socio-cultural, political, and platform-related factors driving harassment on Instagram.
- iii. To articulate the implications of the findings for women's political participation, policy, and digital governance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Feminist Standpoint Theory, a feminist epistemological framework that foregrounds the knowledge-producing value of marginalized groups' lived experiences in understanding social reality and power relations. Commonly associated with the foundational work of Hartsock (1983) and further developed by Harding (1987, 2004) and Smith (1987), Feminist Standpoint Theory emerged from Marxist

thought and feminist critiques of positivist and ostensibly value-neutral knowledge traditions. Central to the theory is the argument that dominant forms of knowledge tend to reflect the interests, experiences, and worldviews of socially powerful groups—most notably men—thereby obscuring structures of inequality and domination.

A key premise of Feminist Standpoint Theory is that knowledge is socially situated and that individuals' positions within social hierarchies shape how they experience, interpret, and understand the world (Harding, 2004). From this perspective, women's social locations—particularly within male-dominated political and institutional spaces—provide critical insight into gendered power relations that are often invisible within dominant epistemological frameworks. Women's experiences therefore constitute not merely subjective accounts but analytically significant standpoints from which to interrogate political authority, exclusion, and symbolic violence (Smith, 1987).

In relation to this study, Feminist Standpoint Theory offers a powerful lens for analysing digital harassment targeting female Members of Parliament in Tanzania. Women MPs operate at the intersection of gendered political institutions and highly mediated digital environments, where authority, legitimacy, and visibility are continuously negotiated. Understanding harassment on Instagram requires centring how women themselves experience and interpret online abuse, rather than treating harassment as isolated acts of deviance. The theory enables the study to conceptualise digital harassment as a structural phenomenon rooted in patriarchal power relations, political hierarchies, and culturally embedded norms regarding gender and leadership (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 2004).

Importantly, Feminist Standpoint Theory also facilitates analysis of how digital platforms reproduce and intensify offline inequalities. Instagram does not function as a neutral communicative space; its visual orientation, engagement metrics, and participatory affordances shape how political actors are represented and evaluated. For women politicians, these dynamics amplify surveillance, moral judgement, and objectification, reinforcing societal expectations concerning femininity, respectability, and authority. Applying Feminist Standpoint Theory thus helps explain why female politicians are disproportionately subjected to personalised, moralised, and aggressive forms of online harassment compared to their male counterparts.

At the same time, the study remains attentive to long-standing critiques of Feminist Standpoint Theory, particularly concerns that it may risk treating women as a homogeneous category. Female Members of Parliament are not a monolithic group, and their experiences of digital harassment may vary according to intersecting factors such as age, political affiliation, visibility, class, and public profile. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, Feminist Standpoint Theory remains an appropriate and robust framework for this study because it foregrounds power, inequality, and lived experience—dimensions that are

central to understanding gendered digital harassment within contemporary political communication.

Related Empirical Studies

A substantial body of international scholarship demonstrates that digital harassment of women in politics is systematic, gendered, and embedded within broader power relations rather than constituting incidental online misconduct. Research across Western democratic contexts consistently shows that online abuse functions as a continuation of offline political violence, aimed at delegitimising women's authority, disciplining their political participation, and reinforcing masculine norms of leadership (Krook, 2020; Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020). Women politicians are disproportionately targeted with sexist insults, sexual threats, appearance-based commentary, and character attacks that redirect political discourse away from policy substance toward personal and moral judgement (Sobieraj, 2020; Jane, 2021).

Empirical studies further indicate that platform affordances play a critical role in shaping the form and intensity of harassment. Features such as anonymity, algorithmic amplification, virality, and inconsistent moderation practices embolden perpetrators and normalise abusive behaviour (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020). Visual and participatory platforms are particularly hostile environments for women in public life, as they intensify objectification and moral policing by blurring boundaries between public leadership and private identity (Jane, 2021; Soriano, 2022). Despite these insights, much of the existing literature remains concentrated on text-based platforms such as Twitter and on Global North contexts, leaving visual-centric platforms like Instagram comparatively underexplored, especially within developing democratic settings.

Emerging African scholarship underscores the importance of sociocultural norms, political polarisation, and patriarchal constructions of leadership in shaping online hostility toward women politicians. Studies from Kenya and Nigeria reveal that digital harassment is frequently mobilised as a political strategy during periods of heightened contestation, including elections and contentious policy debates, serving to intimidate, silence, or discredit women leaders (Salawu, 2021; Mutheu & Baatiema, 2022). Regional research further highlights the role of respectability politics and moral expectations, demonstrating that women leaders are judged against rigid standards of femininity and moral conduct that are rarely applied to men (Lukalo & Ombati, 2021; Nyabola, 2020).

In the Tanzanian context, available empirical studies acknowledge the growing political use of social media and the gendered nature of online commentary, but they remain limited in scope and analytical depth. Research by Mashauri and Khamis (2022) documents the increasing reliance of political actors on social media platforms, including Instagram, for political communication, while studies by Mtega and Lwoga (2021) and Maliganya and Kalinga (2023) highlight the prevalence of online harassment and weak

enforcement of cyber regulations. However, these studies largely stop short of systematically analysing harassment dynamics among elected women politicians or grounding their analysis in feminist theory. As a result, the specific experiences of female Members of Parliament and the platform-specific dynamics of Instagram remain under-theorised.

While prior research clearly establishes that digital harassment against women in politics is widespread, gendered, and politically consequential, significant gaps persist regarding platform-specific dynamics, African parliamentary contexts, and theoretically informed analyses of harassment drivers on Instagram. By building on existing empirical evidence and applying a feminist standpoint lens, this study addresses these gaps and extends global debates on gender, politics, and digital communication into an underrepresented context.

3. METHODOLOGY

An exploratory qualitative research design was employed, grounded in qualitative content analysis, to examine the drivers and manifestations of digital harassment targeting female Members of Parliament in Tanzania on Instagram. This design was appropriate given the limited empirical scholarship on the intersection of gendered political harassment and platform-specific dynamics within the Tanzanian context, and its suitability for uncovering underlying mechanisms, meanings, and patterns within online discourse.

The study analysed publicly accessible Instagram comments posted in response to content shared by three high-profile Tanzanian female Members of Parliament between January and July 2025. These MPs were purposively selected based on their sustained political visibility and high levels of online engagement, which increased the likelihood of capturing substantive instances of harassment. From a sampling frame of 150 posts, a corpus of 1,200 comments containing elements of abuse, sexism, or gendered hostility was identified, anonymised, and prepared for analysis in accordance with ethical standards governing research using public digital data. The selection criteria focused on overt manifestations of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including sexist slurs, personal attacks unrelated to policy, defamation, threats, and objectifying language.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic coding process informed by Objectification Theory and feminist scholarship on political misogyny. Coding progressed from open coding to axial and selective coding, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and explanatory categories such as political misogyny, patriarchal norm reinforcement, online anonymity and impunity, and personal scrutiny and sexualisation. Multiple coders independently analysed the data, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus to enhance analytical rigour and credibility (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach moved beyond simple enumeration of abuse to reveal how digital harassment operates as a gendered mechanism of political

exclusion within Instagram's networked public sphere (Cotter & Savage, 2019; Silverman, 2020). Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from St. Augustine University of Tanzania, and all data were handled in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving publicly accessible online content.

4. FINDINGS

Forms of Digital Harassment

Analysis of Instagram posts and associated comment threads demonstrates that digital harassment targeting female Members of Parliament in Tanzania is pervasive, patterned, and multi-dimensional rather than sporadic or incidental. The most prevalent form of harassment was performance-based abusive criticism, accounting for approximately 38 per cent of the analysed comments. Although often framed as political critique, this category frequently escalated into derogatory and dismissive attacks that questioned women's competence, intelligence, and legitimacy as political leaders. Such commentary rarely engaged substantively with policy positions or legislative performance, instead deploying ridicule and contempt to undermine women's authority.

Personal insults constituted the second most common form of harassment (33 per cent) and were directed at women MPs' intelligence, family life, marital status, and personal character. These attacks were highly personalised and gendered, reinforcing the tendency to evaluate women politicians through private and moral lenses rather than public or professional criteria. Explicit political misogyny and gendered attacks accounted for 18 per cent of the dataset and were characterised by sexist stereotypes and narratives that portrayed women's political participation as unnatural, inappropriate, or morally suspect.

Less frequent but particularly severe forms of harassment included discrediting and delegitimising commentary (7 per cent), sexualised harassment (2.3 per cent), and threats or intimidation (1.7 per cent). Although numerically smaller, sexualised remarks and threats carried disproportionate psychological and symbolic harm. These forms of abuse served to discipline women's political visibility by invoking fear, shame, and bodily vulnerability, underscoring the distinctly gendered nature of online hostility directed at women MPs.

Drivers of Digital Harassment

The analysis identified five interrelated factors that collectively drive digital harassment against female Members of Parliament on Instagram. Political polarisation and online anonymity emerged as the most significant contributors, accounting for approximately 27 per cent of identified drivers. Harassment intensified during politically sensitive periods such as parliamentary debates and election-related moments, suggesting that online abuse

functions as a strategic tool of political contestation rather than spontaneous incivility.

Entrenched social and cultural norms rooted in patriarchal expectations accounted for 24 per cent of harassment drivers. These norms reflect resistance to women's visibility and authority in leadership roles and underpin moral judgement directed at women MPs who are perceived to transgress traditional gender boundaries. Disinformation, misinformation, and digital illiteracy contributed a further 22 per cent, as misleading or sensationalised narratives circulated rapidly and triggered waves of coordinated abuse.

Inadequate platform moderation and weak legal enforcement mechanisms accounted for 15 per cent of harassment drivers, reinforcing a climate of impunity in which abusive behaviour is rarely sanctioned. Objectification and sexualisation, although accounting for 12 per cent, played a critical role in redirecting attention away from political substance toward women's bodies, appearance, and private lives. This dynamic illustrates how Instagram's visual affordances amplify gendered scrutiny and reinforce symbolic exclusion from legitimate political discourse.

Coping Responses

Female Members of Parliament employed a range of coping strategies to manage digital harassment, including selective engagement, strategic disengagement, blocking or reporting abusive users, and publicly clarifying misrepresented issues. Some MPs adopted proactive digital safety practices, while others relied on informal support networks, peer solidarity, and trusted aides to mitigate the emotional and professional impact of online abuse.

While these responses reflect resilience and adaptive agency, the findings indicate that individual-level coping strategies are inherently limited. Participants consistently emphasised that without effective institutional support, robust legal enforcement, and stronger platform accountability mechanisms, responsibility for managing harassment is unfairly shifted onto women themselves. This underscores the need to move beyond individualised coping toward structural and systemic responses to gendered digital harassment.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that digital harassment targeting female Members of Parliament (MPs) in Tanzania is systematic, patterned, and deeply gendered rather than random or incidental. Drawing on Feminist Standpoint Theory, the experiences of women MPs reveal broader structures of power and inequality that shape political participation in both online and offline spaces (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 2004; Smith, 1987). By centering the lived experiences of women in politics, the study demonstrates that harassment functions as a mechanism to police, discredit, and delegitimize female authority in a socio-political context historically dominated by patriarchal norms.

Analysis of the forms of harassment shows that performance-based abusive criticism and personal insults are the most prevalent. Comments that questioned women's competence, intelligence, or professional performance were often framed as political critique but rarely engaged with substantive policy issues (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020; Sobieraj, 2020). Instead, they relied on ridicule and dismissiveness to undermine authority, reflecting findings from both African and global contexts, where digital abuse frequently shifts attention away from policy and toward women's morality, appearance, or family life (Lukalo & Ombati, 2021; Nyabola, 2020). Sexualized and delegitimizing attacks, although less frequent, carried disproportionate psychological and symbolic impact, reinforcing patriarchal authority by creating a climate of fear, self-doubt, and caution around women's political visibility (Amnesty International, 2021; Krook, 2020). Instagram's visual affordances intensified these dynamics by encouraging scrutiny of personal imagery, further blurring the boundaries between public leadership and private identity, and amplifying moral policing and objectification.

The drivers of harassment identified in the study highlight the interplay of socio-political, cultural, and technological factors. Political polarization and online anonymity facilitated coordinated attacks, particularly during periods of heightened political contestation, suggesting that harassment often serves as a strategic tool of political intimidation rather than spontaneous incivility (Salawu, 2021; Muteu & Baatiema, 2022). Entrenched patriarchal norms reinforced moral judgment and scrutiny of women MPs, demonstrating the persistence of gendered expectations in leadership and the continued marginalization of women in public life (Mtega & Lwoga, 2021; Mwakagenda, 2024). The circulation of misinformation and disinformation contributed to waves of coordinated abuse, while weak platform moderation and inconsistent legal enforcement reinforced a climate of impunity (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2020; Maliganya & Kalinga, 2023). Although objectification and sexualization were less frequent numerically, they played a critical role in redirecting public attention away from political substance and toward women's bodies, appearance, and private lives, illustrating how Instagram's visual and participatory features amplify gendered surveillance (Jane, 2021; Soriano, 2022).

Coping strategies employed by women MPs, including selective engagement, strategic disengagement, and reliance on informal support networks, demonstrate resilience and adaptive agency (Cotter & Savage, 2019; Silverman, 2020). However, these strategies were inherently limited, highlighting the structural nature of digital harassment. Individual-level responses cannot fully mitigate the sustained and systemic hostility that women face, effectively shifting the responsibility of managing harassment onto the victims themselves. This underscores that harassment is not only a personal challenge but also a reflection of broader social and institutional failures in protecting women's political participation.

The study illustrates that digital harassment against female MPs in Tanzania is a systematic, gendered, and politically consequential phenomenon. Its forms, drivers, and effects reflect a convergence of patriarchal social norms, political competition, and platform affordances, which collectively undermine women's authority, visibility, and engagement in democratic processes (Mashauri & Khamis, 2022; Mtega & Lwoga, 2021). By analyzing harassment through the lens of women's lived experiences, the study reveals how digital platforms reproduce and intensify offline inequalities, offering critical insight into the challenges that women face in asserting their political legitimacy and sustaining active participation in Tanzanian politics.

Theoretical and Practical contribution

This study makes several important contributions to scholarship on gendered political violence, digital communication, and political participation. Theoretically, it strengthens the application of Feminist Standpoint Theory in understanding digital harassment by demonstrating how women MPs' lived experiences reveal structural inequalities in political and online spaces (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 2004; Smith, 1987). By foregrounding the perspectives of female politicians, the study confirms that harassment is not merely incidental online misconduct but a manifestation of patriarchal power dynamics that persist across both offline and online political arenas (Jane, 2021; Sobieraj, 2020). Moreover, the study highlights how platform-specific affordances, such as Instagram's visual orientation and engagement metrics, amplify existing gendered vulnerabilities, extending theoretical insights about the intersection of technology, gender, and political authority.

Practically, the findings offer critical implications for policy, institutional governance, and platform regulation. First, they underscore the need for stronger legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to address digital harassment as a form of gendered political violence, moving beyond general cybercrime provisions (Maliganya & Kalinga, 2023; Mwakagenda, 2024). Second, they highlight the necessity for social media platforms to adopt context-sensitive moderation practices that recognize the political and gendered dimensions of online abuse, particularly in visual-centric networks such as Instagram (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2020; Soriano, 2022). Third, the study demonstrates that while individual coping strategies by women MPs are important, they are insufficient without systemic support from institutions, civil society, and peer networks to safeguard political participation. By combining feminist theory with empirical insights from Tanzania, the study advances both local and global understandings of how digital spaces reproduce, reinforce, and potentially challenge gendered hierarchies in politics.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital harassment directed at female Members of Parliament (MPs) in Tanzania represents a pervasive and deeply gendered phenomenon that extends beyond isolated incidents, shaping both political participation and public perceptions of women in leadership. The abuse manifests in multiple forms, including performance-based criticism, personal attacks, political misogyny, sexualized commentary, and efforts to delegitimize authority. Such practices are reinforced by entrenched patriarchal norms, political polarization, online anonymity, misinformation, and limited enforcement of legal and platform-level protections. Women MPs are subjected to intensified scrutiny on visual platforms like Instagram, where personal imagery and public visibility converge, amplifying objectification and moral policing. While women employ strategies such as selective engagement, strategic disengagement, and peer support to manage hostility, these approaches offer only partial mitigation and highlight the structural nature of the challenges they face.

Addressing these challenges requires a combination of systemic, institutional, and cultural interventions. Legal and policy frameworks need to explicitly recognize digital harassment as a form of gendered political violence, supported by mechanisms that enable reporting, investigation, and redress. Social media platforms must implement context-sensitive moderation strategies that are responsive to gendered and political forms of abuse, including enhanced monitoring and rapid response to targeted attacks. Political institutions and civil society actors play a crucial role in supporting women in public office by providing digital safety training, fostering peer networks, and promoting awareness campaigns to challenge societal norms that perpetuate harassment. Broader public engagement is also essential to counter misinformation and reshape perceptions of women's political authority, fostering a political culture in which female leadership is respected and protected.

Creating a political environment in which women can engage confidently and effectively requires recognition that harassment is both structurally rooted and contextually mediated. By addressing the interplay of socio-cultural norms, political dynamics, and platform affordances, it is possible to reduce barriers to participation, enhance democratic inclusivity, and safeguard the legitimacy and agency of women in political life. Sustained attention to these dimensions is essential for ensuring that digital spaces contribute positively to political engagement rather than serving as arenas for reinforcing gendered inequalities.

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