

WEBINAR REPORT: DIGITAL SAFETY AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION & REPRESENTATION



The webinar brought together participants from multiple regions, highlighting the global nature of digital spaces and their dual role as platforms for both opportunity and risk. Framed within the 16 Days of Activism, the discussion examined how online environments can provide visibility, engagement, and political participation for women, while also posing threats through harassment and digital violence. The focus was on how digital spaces affect women's political engagement, balancing the risks of online violence with opportunities for visibility and participation. Contributions from young women in the Global South underscored the specific threats of digital harassment in political contexts and the need for targeted protective strategies.

SPEAKERS

- ❖ **Anita Kamanga**, Deputy Mayor, Zambia
- ❖ **Annah Sande**, First Female and Youngest Mayor of Epworth, Zimbabwe
- ❖ **Ayisat Aguda**, Woman Leader of the Social Democratic Party, Nigeria
- ❖ **Mabel Obeng**, Young Women of Africa Ghana Country Leader and Regional Director for ALSA West Africa, Ghana
- ❖ **Nerat Gyang**, First Welfare Director of the Faculty of Social Sciences Students' Union of the University of Jos, Nigeria
- ❖ **Savera Prakash**, Politician (Candidate for the Provincial Assembly, KP, 2024 Elections), Pakistan
- ❖ **Sneha Padayan**, Politician and Elected Local Representative, India
- ❖ **Wanja Mania**, Aspiring Young Politician and Gender & Disability Specialist, Kenya

FRAMING THE CORE ISSUE: WHY THE DIGITAL SPACE IS UNSAFE

Digital spaces are not neutral; they reflect and amplify offline gender norms, social hierarchies, and power imbalances. Misogyny, discrimination, and unequal expectations that exist in society are replicated online, often becoming more visible and aggressive. Women, particularly young women in politics, face targeted harassment, threats, and disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining their credibility and silencing their participation.

Social norms shape online behaviour, with women's actions scrutinized more heavily than men's and deviations from expected roles provoking disproportionate backlash. These norms also influence institutional responses, frequently limiting recourse or protection for those facing harassment. Digital violence has intersectional dimensions: women from marginalized groups, including those with disabilities or minority status, experience intensified attacks that further restrict their political visibility and engagement.

DIGITAL SPACE AS A TOOL OF PUNISHMENT

Digital platforms are increasingly used to punish women who speak out, particularly in patriarchal contexts. Online harassment including hate speech, doxxing, and targeted threats serves to limit women's participation and reinforce existing power structures. Attacks are often motivated by frustration, insecurity, or a desire to assert dominance, and the anonymity afforded by digital platforms can intensify aggression.

Women in political roles are disproportionately targeted, with media and social platforms amplifying stereotypes, focusing on appearance rather than competence, and questioning legitimacy. Harassment discourages engagement in political life and perpetuates perceptions that women are less capable of leadership.

The risks are intersectional. Women from marginalized groups, including those with disabilities or minority status, experience intensified attacks that combine gendered scrutiny with additional forms of discrimination, undermining visibility and political participation. Overall, digital violence functions as both a tool of punishment and a mechanism that reproduces and amplifies offline inequalities.

STRATEGIES TO PROTECT WOMEN IN DIGITAL SPACES

Protecting women online requires both individual strategies and systemic change. Legal and policy frameworks are essential, including awareness of rights and enforceable gender-sensitive cybercrime laws, but gaps in enforcement, institutional capacity, and survivor support persist. Civil society organizations play a key role in raising awareness, providing training, supporting survivors, and holding institutions and technology companies accountable.

At the individual level, women can strengthen digital safety by owning their narrative, maintaining consistent online presence, practicing strong cyber hygiene, separating public and private accounts, monitoring for harassment, and building trusted support networks. Emotional and psychosocial support is critical, as digital harassment can cause trauma and undermine participation. Digital literacy and cybersecurity training help reduce vulnerability, especially where men typically receive more opportunities to protect their online identities.

Engaging men as proactive allies was highlighted as transformative. Male allies can publicly defend women, hold other men accountable, mentor, and collaborate in political engagement, helping shift social norms and promote gender equality. Multi-generational and cross-gender networks also

support women in navigating internalized bias and patriarchal pressures, while early education of boys fosters long-term respect and equitable participation.

Overall, strategies for digital protection combine practical safety measures, legal and institutional safeguards, social support systems, and cultural change. When implemented together, these measures reduce risk, empower women, and create conditions for inclusive political participation in both online and offline spaces.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Online environments mirror social norms, gender biases, and power hierarchies.
- Women face disproportionate scrutiny and reputational risk.
- Harassment, hate speech, doxxing, and threats punish women who speak out, limiting participation and reinforcing patriarchal structures.
- Intersectional vulnerabilities increase risks for marginalized groups, including women with disabilities or minority status.
- Awareness and enforcement of gender-sensitive laws are critical for protection.
- Survivor support combining legal, emotional, and psychosocial assistance restores safety and agency.
- Education, advocacy, and training help shift harmful norms and provide practical and emotional support.
- Community networks and international initiatives strengthen confidence, resilience, and strategic engagement.
- Engaging men proactively challenges harassment, amplifies accountability, and promotes gender equality.
- Male allies can defend women publicly, hold other men accountable, and provide mentorship and political support.
- Women should own their narrative, maintain cyber hygiene, and separate public and private accounts.
- Vigilant monitoring, early response, support networks, and careful management of personal information enhance protection.
- Online spaces pose harassment risks but also provide visibility, engagement, and political opportunities.
- Transformation requires individual resilience, systemic accountability, and cultural change.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Digital spaces present both opportunities and risks for women's political participation. While they enable visibility and engagement, they also amplify harassment, reinforce patriarchal norms, and reproduce offline inequalities.

Addressing these challenges requires a combination of individual strategies such as controlling one's narrative, maintaining digital security, and building support networks and systemic measures, including legal enforcement, civil society advocacy, and tech company accountability. Engaging men as proactive allies and addressing intersectional vulnerabilities are also essential.

Sustainable change depends on coordinated action across social, legal, and technological domains, recognizing that digital safety is integral to inclusive and equitable political participation.